

First trip to India. -1985.

In 1985 I visited India to participate in the International Congress of Genetics in New Delhi. A number of Indian post-docs worked in my laboratory in the 1970's and some of them had become close personal friends. One of these was Dr. Raman Kothari, who had returned to India the previous year. Dr. Kothari had spent two separate periods in my laboratory, about 10 years apart. The announcement of an international meeting in New Delhi, gave me the opportunity of visiting India and simultaneously, the possibility of visiting and touring India with Raman and experiencing a different life style.

Raman was a small, wiry, very dark young man. He hailed from Baroda on the West Coast of India. Today the city is known as Vadodara, and has a population of approximately 2,000,000. When he first came to my lab he was in his early 20's married with two daughters. A major reason for working the US was to earn dowry money for the future weddings of his daughters (which might be 15-20 years hence). He was a devout Hindu, his apartment containing Indian gods whom he devotedly worshipped. His wife and children, did not accompany him since he was afraid they might be corrupted by US values, or should I say sins: the wrong food, exposure to too much sex, films and TV. He shunned the Western way of life. However he was an extremely kind person, willing to help the sick, and students and other post-docs in the laboratory. He made friends easily, and was very trustworthy.

He had an unusual scientific background having spent time in industry and also in a department of chemistry (or biochemistry) at the University of Poona. His expertise was column chromatography, particularly of vitamins and plant products and in my lab expanded it to DNA and nucleotide chromatography. He had published extensively in the Journal of Chromatography prior to joining my laboratory. His interest in my laboratory stemmed from our own work on tRNA chromatography a project I had initiated in my laboratory. He was a natural fit in the lab of 1972-75. We published many papers both technical and reviews during that period.

He was very sociable and invited us to dinner shortly after his arrival. I remember that the first time we received an invitation, we were quite apprehensive, a single man cooking and Indian food to boot. Since he was a strict vegetarian, we should not have worried too much. The food was an array of rice and rice dishes (or lentils) and only mildly spiced. We survived the experience without mishap.

Shortly after his arrival, he informed me of a medical emergency. One of his friends (or colleagues/students) Shanker was in Huston, Texas for heart surgery. He was among the first to receive a heart transplant, performed by the famous pioneer of this technique, Dr. DeBakey. He needed some place to recuperate, and Raman indicated that he was bringing him to Bloomington to stay with him in his apartment. . A few days after his arrival Shankar became ill, and was diagnosed with hepatitis B. I do not know what the specific treatment was in these days, if any, but he stayed at the Bloomington hospital for the required period of time, without charge! Bloomington hospital at this time was a not-for profit city hospital and was administered by an elected civic board, overseen by the league of woman voters. There were special arrangements for cases like Shankar's, a foreign student without funds. Shankar stayed in Bloomington for about six weeks and helped Raman write one paper. He then returned to India and took up a position in Poona. Raman left in the mid 70's for Baroda and then returned to my lab in the early 1980's for another couple of years, with the same aim, to earn money for a dowry for his daughters. It turns out that this was quite unnecessary since both his daughters went on to become physicians and had no need of dowries. However Raman really worried that they would not be able to find husbands without the money. An old tradition that has not died.

My visit to India began in New Delhi. On my arrival I was hit with the most horrible smell and foul air. In order to heat houses the locals burned cow patties. The cow manure was collected, dried and sold as heating fuel. The aroma was overpowering, and this smell lingered every evening. This was in the 1980's. I have been in Delhi only once since then and did not notice this aroma but I have been told by other travellers that the air pollution is still terrible. I stayed at a very luxurious hotel the "Imperial". It turns out to have a long history and is now considered one of the great hotels of the world. The Hotel was designed to present a unique blend of Victorian, Old colonial and Art Deco styles. All the staff wore colonial style uniforms. I did not think too much about its luxuriousness, although I did pay attention to the architecture and detail. I spent most of my time when not at the meeting wandering around Delhi, which I found a fascinating city. It was a city of contrasts, extreme wealth, and extreme poverty. I only once ventured into "old Delhi", which I was warned off by a friend I made among the hotel staff. "Old Delhi "was a shock, masses of people crowded together, an accumulation of colors, funeral processions, turbans and saris of all

colors. I had been warned to beware of pickpockets. The streets were so crowded that only pedestrians or cyclists could move. As everywhere in India there was the ubiquitous cow.

There is nothing more amazing than to see a cow chewing the cud in the middle of a busy road with cars attempting to dodge her, or a cow sitting in the middle of a four-lane highway holding up traffic. Not only are there cows, but the occasional pig, and lots of stray dogs.

I stood out as a foreigner, and I was ripped off as one! The first was while walking in New Delhi, towards the parliament buildings. A young man stopped me and asked if I could tell him the time. By the time I had looked at my watch he had bathed my shoes in cow (or was it human) excrement. He said something like ‘ “your shoes need cleaning”; in response I was about to say no thank you when I looked down and saw the mess. I had no alternative but to remove my shoes, at which point he started to tear the insides out. . “Hi, wait a minute, what are you doing” but he continued and asked innocently something like where were the shoes made. I don’t remember what kind of shoes I was wearing, but he gave me new insoles, cleaned them and smilingly asked for a few Rupees. I had no alternative but gave him what he requested, an amount that Raman said when I told him later s was about a month’s salary. A day later I was walking in another part of Delhi, when a young man approached me and smilingly asked me “what is the time”. I knew what to expect and I said politely I do not need my shoes cleaning. However it was too late, and they were all shitty again. I had learned this time and gave him little money. He argued but I was determined to be stubborn. From then on I only wore sandals. No one tried to polish them

At that time the main means of travelling around Delhi was with human drawn rickshaws or occasionally motorized ones. I hailed a motorized Rickshaw (I learned from a recent film that they are called tuck-tucks) to take me to the Red Fort. I had never thought before of using a human as a horse. There were all types of Rickshaws, some pulled just by human labor, some with bicycle wheels, others with mopeds. When I arrived at the Red Fort I made it quite clear that the driver should not wait. I was in the Fort perhaps an hour or so, and when I came out the driver was still in the same place waiting for me. I had already paid him and wanted to hail another tuck-tuck, but no, he would not hear of it, he would not charge me for waiting ... I was wrong. When we got back to the hotel I was presented

with a hefty bill, including waiting time. He pretended not to understand English, and I succumbed. In actual fact the amount in dollars was very little.

However the high point of my trip was not the International Meeting on genetics, or the time spent in Delhi, but the time spend with Raman Kothari, and going “ native” for a week or two. I must have taken the train to Baroda without mishap, since I do not remember the trip. Raman lived in a small cottage outside the city. There was no landscaping and animals seem to roam around freely. The house was simply furnished, and there was an atmosphere of complete calm and serenity. Radha his wife made me very welcome. She was an attractive, and intelligent woman.. I do not know whether she was as religious as her husband or just conformed to his wishes. I had met her father when he visited Bloomington, and he appeared to be a man of the world, drank alcohol, which Raman didn't and was not averse to joking and enjoying the pleasures of western society.

We discussed the simplicity of their life style in Baroda, and how free from stress it was compared to the life of an associate professor in Bloomington. I quite easily adapted to their life style, not so different from the days of living on the commune in England. We ate only grains, the diet consisting mostly of daal and rice, and home made chapatti or nan. The cooking was done outside on a primus like stove. There was no shower or bath, and water, collected from the local well was heated in a large tub, and one stood outside and poured water from a pitcher onto the head and body. All was simplicity. Toilets were in the house (I think) but the squat type. I stayed with them for a week before embarking on a trip with Raman to the holy sites of that part of India. I had many discussions with Raman about the need or lack of need for material goods. I could see myself leading this simple life and being quite happy. I had no idea where Raman was on the economic scale of the Indian population, but since he worked for Sarabai industries, I assume his salary was more than adequate..

Baroda itself was interesting having many museums and palaces. It had been the capital of a princely state. The maharaja's palace is known as the Laxmi Vilas Palace, and the complex is larger than Buckingham Palace. The city appeared prosperous, and has close to two million inhabitants.

Our first stop in our trip was to the country of the JAINS and their holy sites. This was Mt Abu in Rajasthan, quite some distance away. The Jains are an ancient religious group who believe in non-violence, to all creatures not only man., an ascetic lifestyle and vegans in diet. I don't think Raman was a Jain, but he certainly believed in many of the principles.. Mt Abu is famous for its temples, among the most famous being the Delwara Jain Temple. I must admit I do not remember much about the temple, but more about the discomfort of the trip from Baroda to Mt Abu by train. Raman and I argued over the "comfort" of our trip. I wanted to go second or first class, since the trains in India are overcrowded with people hanging on and even riding on the roofs. He insisted we go 3rd class to avoid being robbed and possibly murdered. He felt that any show of ostentation would lead to trouble. I gave in. He ordered a berth in 3rd class, since it was an overnight trip. The berth turned out to be a wooden platform, in a regular coach, with peasants spitting Betel nuts sitting underneath. Raman brought some blankets to keep us warm. I could not sleep and held my hand in my pocket containing my wallet all night. I decided that in future I would take the risk and travel first or second class, no more of this. In Mt Abu I became an honorable Jain, and had a red mark placed on my forehead a symbol of religiosity by a Jain priest who resided in a cave in the mountain. It was like a Biblical scene.

Travel by Train in India is full of hazards and one has to have a sense of humor to cope with it. One day we were waiting for the train and I entered the first class waiting room. There were leather easy chairs, to which I gladly attached myself. As I leaned back and made myself comfortable I felt a scurry of activity underneath my bottom, and out ran a pack of mice. I must have sat on a nest of mice. I assume that all the chairs were havens for rodents. Luckily this time it was not rats, although I saw plenty around.

I did finally take a first class cabin on my way from Baroda to Bombay from where I was taking my flight back to the USA. I shared a cabin with private berth with some Indian businessmen. It was comfortable, no hassle, and no thieves. Although there may be the occasional high-jacking and kidnapping, I do not think it is any more dangerous than in other countries. .

After Mt Abu we continued North into Rajasthan to the beautiful city of Udaipur, which is situated on Lake Pichola. It is a magnificent city. We took a boat trip to one of the luxury hotels on the lake to have a look. It was too expensive for Raman to stop for a drink or to

stay. The place left an everlasting impression on me. Our next stop was Ahmedabad. This was the town of Gandhi. The city was the headquarters for Gandhi's independence movement, and contained two of Gandhi's Ashrams. It also was the site of many anti-British riots and riots between Moslems and Hindu's. I remember it as a busy city with wide boulevards, but Gandhi's Ashrams did not impress me. . Once again my trip was colored by transport conditions. This time instead of train we decided to take a the overnight bus from Ahmedabad back to Baroda. It was a very comfortable bus, and I was exhausted from our daytime wanderings. As soon as we started the 12-hour trip the driver switched on a large screen playing " Bollywood" movies. I desperately wanted to sleep, and politely asked the driver if he could turn off the film or at least make it quieter. As soon as he did this there were angry shouts from all over the bus, I suppose curses in Hindi that I had dared to have the volume lowered. I think some of the passengers would have become violent if the driver had not turned the volume up again. Somehow I arrived back in Baroda in one piece. I must admit that despite these entire comic 'misadventures" I enjoyed my time in India. I was fascinated by the color, by the people, many unbelievably beautiful, and one can enjoy India if one can ignore the poverty. I met with many Indians mostly from the middle class, and I got the idea that they just ignore the poverty around them. Only a few make any effort to help the poor. When in Delhi I met a young man working in the hotel, I think his name was George, and he was a Christian. We become good friends and he told me how he helped abused women and found them shelters or places to live. He was one of the few I met who really cared about the poor and the social problems of India. He had a degree in mathematics, and could not find a position, and thus worked in the gift store of the hotel. There are few like him. Indian society in general appeared to be very individualistic and at that time very disorganized and not very caring. George was an example of an over educated individual in a country and society that did not offer him a future. I discussed this with Raman and he was quite indifferent. Even on my second trip many years later, our guide and driver had a law degree and could not find suitable work. The difference between societies such as Japan and China and India are quite striking. I became more conscience of this after my visit to Japan and China a few years later. India is a much more heterogeneous society, and certainly the individual has more freedom, if he can overcome

the poverty. The big problem is population, and until population growth is controlled India will always remain as is, disorganized and poor.