

GREAT INDIA

A trip to Agra, New Delhi & Jaipur

by Elena Galani





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“I dive down into the depth of the ocean of forms*” And of colors. And sounds. And odors. And horns. Innumerable horns.

“Horn please” or “Horn ok” is hand-painted in colorful calligraphy on the rear of most trucks traveling though the country, together with flowery patterns, elegant motifs, the brightly painted faces of Indian gods and the words “Great India” (which indicates that a truck has a license to travel throughout the whole country).

I am seated in an old bus traveling from Agra to New Delhi. In 2010, when an adolescent girl was repeatedly raped and finally murdered by a group of her classmates, a law was introduced banishing the use of window curtains in all buses in New Delhi as a protective measure. Peculiarly, they are allowed in other cities, in Jaipur for example.

Looking through the window, I see color is everywhere. In the street ahead of me, in the dusty landscape, the beauty of Indian women stands out because of the bright and vivid colors of their saris. Passing vehicles leave behind a trail of dust; there are cows, tuk-tuks, three-wheeled, hand-painted rickshaws, all kinds of trash and trucks with the “Great India” sign covered with lights.

And India is a great country indeed. In terms of both size and population and because of the number of their gods –in a population of approximatively 1.3 billion people there are more than a million gods. India is a real mosaic of religious beliefs, tribes and castes, all coexisting despite their contradictory traits.

It is probably one of the most surreal places I have ever been.

Though India is real. The words of British artist Anish Kapoor, “Color is a physical thing: It’s not just a surface,” spring to mind as I get ready to get off the bus.

Walking towards an Hindu temple, I notice posters with the pair of Gandhi’s eyeglasses on the walls. “Clean India” is the slogan of the country’s prime minister, Narendra Modi.

Today, almost ten years after the rape of that girl, India is still one of the most dangerous countries for a woman to live in (from being top place in 2012, it now ranks fourth after Afghanistan, Congo and Pakistan for the levels of violence against women - researchers have taken into account the rates of medical care, domestic violence, sexual abuse, lack of access to financial resources, birth control through abortion for female embryos, genital mutilation, trafficking and attacks with acid.

Fortunately, the situation is gradually (but slowly) improving during the last few years. India is getting cleaner, and more women have access to the educational system. Although they are still subordinate to their father or husband – marriage remains the best option for them by far (and they confidently rest their hopes for a successful marriage on their astrological charts and horoscope!).

I made the conscious choice, for that particular trip, not to focus in the poverty of people. It’s their beauty that impresses me most: an astonishingly beautiful young girl with a bright yellow sari asks me shyly to pose with her for a selfie. She is a student - she came here to visit the temple with her fiancé. He is holding her hand and they look happy together.

I realize I feel (and look) awkward in my black pants carrying around a big camera.

“I dive into the deep ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless.”

Despite its innumerable contradictions, India is beautiful and rising.

Just like the beautiful Indian women.

* Rabindranath Tagore



































































