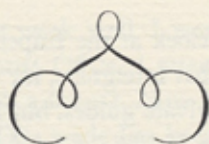


Portrait of India – 1970



The Guide

TODAY, IN THE COURSE OF A PROLONGED VISIT I am paying to my native country in late 1965 and 1966, I go on a tour of New Delhi. Since I was here last, on another visit, in 1959—I have spent nearly all my adult life in Britain and the United States—the city has fanned out in all directions. Where once there were waste tracts, there are now little self-contained suburbs, each busily searching for an exclusive identity. (There is Defense Colony, Diplomatic Enclave, Golf Links, and one that is called simply Friends' Colony.) An index to the status of the denizens of a particular suburb is the size of their houses, and an index to their snobbery, perhaps, is their system of naming, numbering, and lettering these dwellings—which are, however, no easier to tell apart than the streets. The general plan seems to be to confound the interloper from the next suburb—and, certainly, the stranger to the city, who is additionally burdened with the necessity of remembering English street names from the days of the British raj along with new Indian street names (for instance, King Edward Road, named after Edward VII, has become Maulana Azad Road, named after the late Indian leader), for the two sets of names appear to be used interchangeably. Nor is there any limit to the burgeoning of oppressive suburbs (which now also have English and Indian names; for instance, Diplomatic Enclave is called Chanakya Puri)—the Indian version of the nightmare that is Los Angeles, and with, even for the well-off, nothing more advanced than a bicycle or a tonga or a scooter-driven rickshaw to cover the distances that go with them.

I present myself at nine o'clock at the Imperial Hotel, an embarkation point for city tours. I notice that foreigners, for the most part, head for big private cars with their own private guides, but I wait by two public buses, amid tourists from other parts of India, who show a curiosity about things Indian that would have been inconceivable when I was here last. In the babel of Indian languages, I can distinguish Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada; most of my fellow-tourists, I gather, are from south India. I take a seat in the front of the first bus, near the guide, who is an elderly Sikh with a long beard. He is clad in a dingy beige turban, a patched beige tweed coat, loose gray flannels, and brown sandals, with a white drip-dry shirt, which is the only immaculate part of his dress; the shirt is open at the neck, showing a bit of maroon neckcloth. He talks through a microphone over the deafening noise of the bus's motor: "Gentlemen and ladies, I am your friendly guide, and perhaps I ought to begin by giving you a tour of myself."

I brace myself for anything.

He goes on, "Gentlemen and ladies, I have three daughters and they are all well married, thank God. One of my sons-in-law is a successful veterinarian. One of my sons-in-law is a horticulturalist in London, and if you go to London he will be pleased to meet you. One of my sons-in-law, without asking me, applied for the Air Force and was accepted as one of the few; I wanted to encourage him to prospect in Canada or America. I have officiated as a personal secretary to a celebrated maharaja; I still have a telephone, even though I have retired from the maharaja's service."

A voice directly behind me asks, "What do you mean, 'officiated'?"

"Officiating from leave vacancy," the guide says, clarifying little.

A voice, this time from the back of the bus, shouts, "Sirdarji, I cannot hear you! I shall have to write a letter of complaint to the Government of India Tourist Office!" The voice belongs to an old man who is, if anything, more rumped than the guide. He is obviously ready for a good verbal joust.

But the guide, raising his voice until it almost cracks, says to the bus in general, with perfect good humor, "I suggest, gentlemen and ladies, all of you write letters of complaint to the Government of India Tourist Office. You must state in the letter (a) that the microphone should be more up-to-date and that instead of being placed here in front it should be planted in the middle of the bus, and (b) that the motor should be well oiled, so that you can all hear my words and be rewarded for your pains and money." The roar of the motor diminishes a little as the driver changes gears, and the guide continues, "Gentlemen and ladies, I want you to know that I

have done my share of the work well. I went to the classes held by the Government of India Tourist Office. I attended them for two or three months and I qualified with a license. Now I get three or four requests a month to lead bus tours. This trade has been increasing, but it is not so good this year, owing to the war with Pakistan. From nine to twelve-forty-five I give the tour of New Delhi, and from two-fifteen to six I give the tour of Old Delhi, the ancient seat of power on the banks of the sacred river Yamuna. For one day's service, I get twenty-two rupees—four dollars. Other days, I call around at a dozen or so travel agencies here in the hope of finding an American tourist who will want a private guide. But there are more than forty of us licensed, about a dozen of whom are lady guides, and they are the most popular. Some of them are very highly connected—wives of Deputy Secretaries—and they are very good at taking the American tourists to shop, and they get good commissions from the tourists as well as the shopkeepers. Some of the men guides may only be able to get American tourists to send them Terylene shirts from abroad."

The pugnacious old man, who turns out to be a Delhi-wallah, moves up to the front and, pencil and pad of paper in hand, settles himself on the right, practically under the guide's nose. "Get to the business of the day," he says menacingly, writing something on his pad. "The bus has been moving through New Delhi, and I have heard you talk only about your family and—"

"On your right, sir," the guide breaks in smartly, "is the Indian Institute of Technology, which is one of the five such institutes in India; the others are in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Kanpur. It gives education in mechanical, civil . . . The admission here is very difficult; a candidate must be a first divisioner in the intermediate and then take a competition which itself is very difficult. But once you are admitted your future is secure."

Lapsing into his earlier, relaxed manner, the guide goes on, "Gentlemen and ladies, we are now on the first lap of a sightseeing tour of New Delhi. Delhi remains the center of power and culture, a city that offers a stimulant to the present and future, and is always interesting to all mankind. This city has grown beyond recognition during the last few decades, owing to many developments and improvements, and the new colonies are on your either side. Gentlemen and ladies, the population of Delhi was eight hundred thousand, but after Independence Delhi cannot be recognized. Delhi has a checkered and eternal history, like the city of Rome. Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras were not cities five hundred years ago, but Delhi was even then the capital of India, and Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras were only cities of mud. Delhi was also the capital of the Pandya during the Maha-

bharata days—B.C.—and during the Rajput rule. The Rajputs were a very brave people, always ready to die for a national cause, always ready to die in wars, and their wives burnt themselves alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands. This was known as *sati*, which was banned by Regulation No. 17 of 1829." This fact, right or wrong, brings me up short, for it fits in oddly with the guide's vague, rambling discourse. But then I remember that Indians, who delight in generalities, will often drop in a fact as if the *raison d'être* of facts were to clinch a vague argument.

The bus stops, and we follow the guide out into the gentle winter sun of Delhi and stand in front of a sort of yard cluttered with large, strangely shaped stone structures painted a bright orange-red, which suggest that Brobdingnagian children have been at work here with Plasticine. "Gentlemen and ladies, here we are at last at Jantar Mantar," the guide says. "'Jantar' comes from '*yantra*,' which is Sanskrit for 'instruments,' and '*mantar*' is Sanskrit for 'functions'—of astronomy. Jantar Mantar was built by the Maharaja Jai Singh. In the eighteenth century, he ruled the Jaipur state, once known as Amber. Maharaja Jai Singh was a great astrological astronomer of his time." The guide turns to a Brobdingnagian sundial and says, "This measures time by shadows. We can see the time of any part of the world, provided we know the latitude. This is the International Timing Clock. By this International Timing Clock, gentlemen and ladies, we can see time for England, Switzerland, Japan, and the Pacific islands. In Delhi it is now ten hours twelve minutes thirty seconds and one-tenth. All of you may please set right your watches. If the sun is not visible, we have got to keep a pot of sand and watch the sand coming out of it, and then it is called 'sand time.'"

Next, the guide leads us to a circular cavity with markings dividing it into twelve parts, and proclaims, "I can read your whole life from this clock, if you tell me the time, date, and exact longitude of the place of your birth." And he is now an astrologer, collecting from the tourists the places, dates, and hours of their births, and making predictions that are as bright as his disposition.

More cavities, more sundials. Other stone structures, with columns and windows. There is nothing about them that is peculiar to Delhi, but the tourists trail the guide dutifully. Only the Delhi-wallah protests. He complains that the narration is lacking in factual detail. The guide obliges the man—whom I look upon as merely a boring heckler—as best he can, with muddled technical disquisitions. The more abstruse the explanation, the more strongly the guide seems to be impressed by his own words.

At length, the guide says it is getting late, and, indeed, he is noticeably

less expansive on our next two stops—at India Gate, which commemorates the dead of the First World War, and the Humayun Tomb, which is encircled by an enormous, geometrically laid-out garden—though he still manages to be eloquent. ("This Humayun's mausoleum was built by the widow of the Mogul emperor who lived in the sixteenth century. It is a precursor to the Taj; I feel it is my duty to tell a little about this mausoleum. It is for a hundred and seventy members of the royal family of Humayun. So you may also call it the Westminster Abbey of the Mogul Empire.")

Back in the bus, the guide breathlessly names stores, buildings, and even stretches of road as we bounce along, and fills in with whatever comments time allows. He points out the statue of the late Deputy Minister Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Reserve Bank of India, the Broadcasting House of All India Radio, the Indian Red Cross, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, Air Headquarters, Rajpath, the Chelmsford Club, the statue of George V, the National Stadium, Jaipur House, the Old Fort, the Oberoi Intercontinental Hotel, the Methodist Church, the Golf Course, Diplomatic Enclave, the Lodhi Gardens, Safdarjung Airport, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Safdarjung Hospital. At the next-to-the-last stop, in front of a seven-hundred-year-old tower of carved red sandstone and white marble, Qutab Minar, which was built by the Muslims—the guide calls it a combination of the Tower of Pisa, the Eiffel Tower, and the Empire State Building—I detach myself from the crowd of tourists and, welcoming a few minutes of silence, drink a Coca-Cola at the monument's outdoor coffee shop.

I clamber aboard the bus as it is pulling out, and, this time, take a seat far in the back. I am enchanted with the guide, but the stones of Delhi are weighing me down, and I look forward to an early release—all the more when I discover that our last stop is a temple of garish appearance and recent origin, full of stone idols. The tourists having all dutifully shed their shoes and gone in, I find myself standing alone out front with the guide and the pugnacious old man.

"Sirdarji, you know Mr. S. N. Chib?" the old man asks. "He is a friend of mine."

The guide adjusts his neckcloth under his beard. "He is the director general of tourism, with the rank of Joint Secretary," he says warily. "But, of course, I am too lowly in the department for him to know me."

"I have drafted my letter of complaint at your suggestion," the heckler goes on, obviously enjoying the effect of his words, and, to my horror, he reads aloud a long letter of accusation, as though, instead of having set

eyes on the guide for the first time this morning, he harbored an ancestral vendetta against him. The heckler charges that the guide has been deceitful, in that he has covered up his lack of knowledge about Delhi with high-flown words; mendacious, in that he has dubbed Qutab Minar "an Empire State Building without lifts;" corrupt, in that he has invited tips from the tourists by calling their attention to the American tourists' custom of showering gifts like drip-dry shirts upon their guides; subversive, in that he has dwelt on a practice like *sati*; and generally smug, supercilious, insulting, and heaven knows what else. At first, the guide tries to interrupt, but as one charge follows another, proclaimed always in a serious, threatening voice, his face takes on a bewildered look, and eventually he drops to his knees, touches the feet of his accuser, and begs for mercy, saying over and over that he has no pension from the maharaja, and the tours are his only source of income.

I am at a loss to understand why this merely boring heckler should have suddenly turned into a threat to the livelihood of the guide, nor can I understand the guide's complete loss of dignity. It is all like a scene out of cheap melodrama, and for a time I find it impossible even to be moved by it. But finally I do convince myself that it is real, and intervene; my pleadings to the heckler take on the abject tone of the guide's, and have no greater effect. A hint of an explanation appears in a remark his accuser makes to me, but this, again, is so bizarre that it is hard to give it any credence. Back in the bus, he sanctimoniously repeats the remark for the benefit of all the tourists. "This guide has been a quack and, from beginning to finish, a charlatan," he says. "I could have overlooked everything else, but I can't ignore his falsehoods about the science of astrology." The accuser, it seems, is a Brahman who fancies himself an astrologer. One or two fellow-tourists who are also Brahmans now mollify him, and by the time we get back to the Imperial Hotel the potential destroyer of our guide's livelihood has become once more—and just as inexplicably—a mere heckler.

"So, gentlemen and ladies," the guide says, having rapidly regained his composure, "this is the end of the first lap of our sightseeing tour. Have a good lunch and rest your minds, and come back at two-fifteen exactly for the second lap of our tour—to Old Delhi."