

A CYCLE OF IND

George Woodcock

And in your excitement at the trip, the last thing in the world that would occur to you is that the strangest glimpses you may have of any creature in the distant lands will be those you catch of yourself.

MARGARET LAURENCE, *The Prophet's Camel Bell*

I HAVE BEEN TRAVELLING TO INDIA, on and off, for more than twenty years. I went there first in 1961, by one of the old P & O boats through the Suez Canal, making the ritual stops at Port Said and Aden and landing finally at Bombay. I returned from my most recent trip, by crowded airliner, via Tokyo, in the early weeks of 1983. Over the years I have written five books, and at least a hundred articles, reviews, and broadcasts in some way connected with India, and I suppose the accumulated knowledge and observation they represent would justify me in assuming the dubious title of Old India Hand. I am, at this moment, engaged in my sixth Indian book, and it is the increasing difficulty of the relations between my travelling persona and the country I have been visiting so long that prompts me to write this essay, since I realize that my ways of perceiving the country have changed over two decades and I am led to speculate on how far the changes are within me, the perceiver, and how far they are in the land perceived.

The first visit, on which my wife Inge accompanied me as she has done on all the later journeys, and took a series of evocative photographs, resulted in the first of my Indian books, which I called *Faces of India*; it was published in 1964, two years after I returned. The very title tells something about the differences between my perceptions then and now, when I am contemplating calling my new book *Walls of India*. Faces give more access than walls. And there is no doubt that I wrote *Faces of India* with a sense of having gained great access into Indian societies and cultures and a considerable understanding of them.

There is a considerable pre-history to that first journey. My interest in India was coterminous with my interest in Gandhi, which began during the 1930's when I was converted to pacifism; pacifism brought me to anarchism, since it

made me reject the claim of the state to dictate my actions, and anarchism in an oblique way confirmed my pacifism, since I concluded that there was no coercion more extreme than the killing of a man. So I rejected all idea of violent revolution, yet I recognized that my ideals of peace, freedom, and equality could only be achieved through major changes in society, and I found — or thought I found — the solution to this problem of radically changing society without killing anybody in the kind of mass civil disobedience which Gandhi developed in the Indian struggle for independence and which he called Satyagraha, or “Soul-Force.”

I began to read everything I could find by and about Gandhi and to search out books on India, and particularly the novels by Indians that in the 1930's and 1940's were beginning to be published in London. I was greatly attracted, for their social awareness and their exotic colouring, by the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, like *Coolie* and *Two Leaves and a Bud*, and a little later, moving around in the bohemian half-world of wartime London, I encountered Anand, and we became good friends. It was he who introduced me to George Orwell.

Time went on. I rejoiced at India's liberation in 1947, and mourned greatly over Gandhi's death in 1948, not only because he had been murdered by fellow Indians, but also because with his departure India seemed irrevocably set under Nehru's direction on the path towards becoming a military and industrialized nation-state on the western model. Then, for awhile, my interest in India hibernated. I came to Canada in 1949, and, travelling to Mexico in 1953 and Peru in 1956, I had enough strange cultures to assimilate and write about. But in the back of my mind the thought of visiting India lingered. I began to develop a curious feeling that a missing part of myself was waiting to be recovered there, and by 1959 I was anxious to go. I was still concerned with the influence Gandhi's teaching and example might still wield in liberated India, and I persuaded the CBC to commission a radio documentary on the subject. My publishers, who were then Faber & Faber, commissioned a book, and the Canada Council, by now in operation, paid my fare.

When we reached India things seemed to fall together in the same propitious way. There, in Bombay when I landed, was my old London friend, Mulk Raj Anand, and a letter of introduction brought me to the house of Patwant Singh, editor of *Design*; between them Mulk and Patwant introduced us to a great range of literati and artists, among whom I remember the shy, ironic figure of R. K. Narayan, whom I thought (and still think) the finest of all the Indian writers in English. Later, by chance in the corridors of All India Radio, where I was getting help in making my radio programmes, we encountered the Tibetan scholar Lobsang Lhalungpa, through whose introductions in the refugee community we eventually met the Dalai Lama, and became involved in aid work that would largely dominate most of our next two decades. Later, by bus, by car, by air, by

river boat, we wandered on a vast sweep through India, from the Kashmir border to Darjeeling in the north, and southward as far as Cochin and Madurai, finally leaving India by the ferry that crossed to Ceylon (as it then was) at Adam's Bridge.

Re-reading the book I wrote from that journey, *Faces of India*, what strikes me first is a vividness and clarity of visual perception and description, and next a quality of innocence that extended from my younger self to the country I describe, or vice versa. Perhaps inevitably one's first view of a country is sharper and more freshly coloured than later ones; it is almost a commonplace of travel writing that the narratives of rapid journeys through an unfamiliar country by a perceptive traveller are usually quite different from the accounts given by people who have lived for a longish period in the same country, and whose perception of detail gets blurred by custom even if their knowledge of the local life by the same token becomes more profound.

I went on that first journey to India with two advantages. First, our earlier travels in Mexico and Peru had inoculated me against the culture shock that often comes from the first encounter with deep poverty; in Mexico I had been so shaken that I was paralyzed as a writer for several months, but nothing of this kind happened in India, where I was moved by what I saw but not incapacitated. Secondly, the fact that I had come with a specific project — the radio documentary on Gandhi — which required that I search out and interview a large number of people, gave me a kind of access to Indian life that would have been much more difficult for the mere wanderer, and this advantage was supplemented as we became involved with the Tibetans by a series of especially interesting encounters all the way along the Himalayan foothills from Dharamsala to Kalimpong.

These factors may explain the variety of *Faces of India* in terms of human encounters, and the fact of an expectant eye meeting an entirely strange landscape and townscape may explain the visual vividness of the book. But it is the innocent quality that at this stage, two decades later, impresses me. It cannot entirely have been the novelty of the scene. It was partly, I think, my own desire to find a country not irrevocably committed to the paths of centralized nationalism and industrialism which it seemed to me were destroying the societies of the West, and partly also because India, at that time, did give the impression that it contained possibilities lost already in the West. The quest for Gandhi's influence was of course a manifestation of my approach; I hoped to find, fourteen years after the country's liberation, the evidence that Gandhi's great plan of a decentralized society based on village regeneration was still alive in the minds of Indians, and my findings were perhaps coloured by my desire. But India was still that country of immense variety which the British had nurtured, perhaps not entirely deliberately, by preserving the double system of directly administered

territories and native states. The native princes had been unseated and their realms incorporated into larger units, but still enough remained of the traditional differences they had preserved to give India a quality of exotic diversity which it has since slowly lost. Perhaps indeed we were going at the best time, when the old tyrannies, both British and native, had come to an end, but the ancient local ways of life that had managed to survive under their sway were still largely untouched by alien influences.

In fact, even while we were in the country on that journey of 1961-62, the events were happening that would irrevocably transform India. One day, trying to get from Agra to Delhi, we found that all the trains had been cancelled, and we had to hire a car at an exorbitant price because of the suddenly increased demand. The railways were in fact being used for the invasion of Goa. This was not Nehru's first military adventure; he had sent his troops into Hyderabad when the Nizam was talking about making it a sovereign state in the middle of India, and he had done the same in Kashmir when Pakistani irregulars came over the border. But the first could be interpreted as an internal policing operation and the second as an act of self-defence in disputed territory. The attack on Goa, whatever its moral aspects, was politically an aggression against the possessions of a foreign power and its possible repercussions were quite different. A few weeks later we were in south India, attending a dinner at the Maharaja's College in Mysore, and as we sat out on the lawn afterwards, the conversation turned to the Goa incident, which, as south Indians, most of the professors who were present treated with detachment as an adventure of the "Men of Delhi," as they called Nehru and his ministers.

One of the younger professors was particularly concerned with the danger of a chain reaction that might run through the whole of Asia. He saw the possibility of the smaller nations, like Indonesia, using India's example to justify their own attempts to take by force what they could not get by quick negotiation. "And perhaps it will not only be the smaller nations," he said. "One never knows where such a process may end. I fear that Nehru and Krishna Menon have set something in motion whose consequences they will soon be regretting." Within a year his fears were confirmed when the Chinese armies marched over the mountains into Assam, but on that warm, tranquil night in Mysore it seemed no more than an interesting speculation between cigarette and cigarette. (*Faces of India*, p. 241.)

I WENT TO INDIA AGAIN over the winter of 1963-64. This time we were on a longer journey, which began in Karachi and ended in Tokyo, and the book I wrote as a result of it, *Asia, Gods and Cities*, covered not only India, but also West Pakistan and East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh),

Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia (and Singapore, which it then included), Hong Kong and Macao, and Japan. I had vaguely in mind the revelation of some common strain uniting all these countries, but to discover that would have needed a long period — possibly years — in the area, and for the most part *Asia, Gods and Cities* turned out to be a series of long self-contained essays, the main theme bringing them together being the problems and arduousness of travels between the countries described, which had made going from Thailand to Cambodia difficult and going to Burma impossible. Nevertheless, there was a unity about the earlier part of the book, entitled “The Double Land,” since — apart from the embedded chapter on our return to the republic of India — it concerned the lost half of British India, Pakistan, which came into existence when liberation in 1947 was so precipitately conducted by Mountbatten that it inevitably involved partition. Here again I had an assignment — another CBC documentary — which gave access that might otherwise have been difficult to many interesting Pakistanis.

Looking again at *Asia, Gods and Cities*, I find it an altogether darker book than *Faces of India*, and this applies especially to the first section. My own attitude was less optimistic, and inevitably less innocent, since I had been following carefully the news of strife — India and Pakistan, India and China — that had been erupting from this area since our first visit, and I realized that changes were taking place in India that would make any turn towards a new Gandhian society even less likely than it had been in 1961. But apart from my personal assessments of the political situation, there is no doubt that the general atmosphere of the two divided parts of the old India had become much darker than I remembered from two years before. In Pakistan, Parliamentary democracy had foundered, and Ayub Khan was trying to temper his dictatorship with a curious indirect voting system called “Basic Democracy,” though the army was still clearly in power. The martial races of West Pakistan were still relatively happy with this situation, but already in East Pakistan on the far side of India we found resentment growing bitter because of what the Moslem Bengalis of this region regarded as geographical discrimination. Whether it was the fault of the authorities in Karachi or whether of an inherent flaw in the Bengali economy, the poverty there was on a vaster and more unrelieved scale than anything we had seen in India; in towns like Dacca and Chittagong (which I came to describe as *rectum mundi*), infinitely decrepit and filled with positive herds of diseased beggars, we felt nothing but despair at the future of Asia. The relation between India and Pakistan had descended into a fratricidal hatred on both sides; India’s humiliation by China, which it could not hope to humble in return, seemed to have been diverted into a greater fury against Pakistan.

Within India we spent our time largely travelling in the Himalayan hill regions, which we visited to arrange aid for the Tibetan refugees, an occupation that

inevitably cast a certain seriousness over our personal view of the world we entered. But quite outside such subjective factors, we found there an atmosphere of fear and suspicion quite different from anything we had experienced two years before. The roads were full of military convoys, building up India's armed presence on the northern frontier. Foreigners who associated with the Tibetan refugees were carefully watched. Permits were now needed, not only to go to Kalimpong and the autonomous state of Sikkim, which were actually on the verge of Chinese-controlled Tibet, but even to visit Darjeeling. We had friends in Sikkim, and with a great deal of difficulty managed to gain a permit to visit them, but a day before we left Delhi the permit was inexplicably cancelled. Such incidents, and the general atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue from which they emanated, inevitably changed and charged what I wrote on India at this time, and the different mood of *Asia, Gods and Cities*, as compared with *Faces of India*, was due partly to the great political shifts that were occurring in South Asia and its environs at this period, but partly also to the subjective shifts on my part that led me not only to expect less than I had found on my first trip but also to react pessimistically to those changes I saw. It was experience taking over from innocence.

BUT IN A WAY INNOCENCE fought to re-establish itself. For I went on that journey of 1963-64 with a second book, as well as *Asia, Gods and Cities*, in my mind. On our first trip I had been fascinated by the Graeco-Indian sculptures from the area of Gandhara around modern Peshawar which I had found in the National Museum in Delhi and the much more lavish Indian Museum in Calcutta. I began to study the background of this fascinating hybrid art in the strange history of the Greek kingdoms that arose in Bactria (now Afghanistan) after Alexander died and spilled over the Hindu Kush into India. At Taxila and other places in what is now Pakistan I was able to visit some of the Greek sites, now strangely forlorn in a landscape which deforestation has long desiccated. The last of the Greek kingdoms of North India vanished when the Parthians destroyed the realm of King Hermaeus and his Queen Calliope about 40 years before the birth of Christ, somewhere near Peshawar, but Greek merchants continued to trade from Alexandria to the Malabar Coast and Greek mercenaries to serve as bodyguards to south Indian rajas for centuries afterwards. Nobody had yet written their whole story, and I did so in *The Greeks in India*.

But why, I now ask myself, when I re-read that book, did I find it necessary to write it as well as *Asia, Gods and Cities*? It was, I think, an attempt to recover that sense of pristine wonder at an unknown world which I had experienced on

the travels that led to *Faces of India*. True, the story that I told of the Greeks who penetrated into India beyond the limits of Alexander's conquests was intrinsically a fascinating one. But it was especially so in a personal way because it enabled me, even as I looked at India with a far more pessimistic eye than on our first journey, to see the country once again with an innocent eye when I put myself in the mind of King Menander riding into the wild and half-tribal India of two millennia ago and finding there a strange marriage between the logical clarity of his own Hellenic mind and the inspired rationalism of the Buddhism which the sage Nagasena taught him in that extraordinary Platonic dialogue transplanted to Indian soil, the *Milindapanha* (*The Questions of King Menander*).

Clearly history rather than another travel book was the medium in which I could keep alive in my mind that India which I had first encountered, and whose loss even a few years later was already distressing me, and when Alan Pringle of Faber & Faber suggested to me that there was probably a very interesting book to be written on the Malabar Coast, I agreed, but specified that it must be a history rather than a travel book. It was the past and its myths that I needed to understand the present.

Inge and I went to the Malabar Coast with notebook, camera, tape recorder, and half-a-dozen auspicious introductions, and several months later we emerged with a massive (and still unpublished) diary of encounters and experiences in what is still probably the most interesting region of India, with its extraordinary interweaving of Hindu, Christian, Moslem, and Jewish traditions. I used this as a basis for further research, and the book I eventually wrote — *Kerala: A Portrait of the Malabar Coast* — seems, when I read it again, the nearest of all my later books to *Faces of India*, even though one is a history decorated by myth and the other a narrative of travel. For what I did in *Kerala* — which some Malayalia regard as the truest history of their state — was to journey through the past and find there that very diversity of culture, that very plenitude of mythical intimations, which, travelling in the present, had once seemed to me the most compelling aspect of India. I was travelling still; only the dimensions had changed.

Our journey to the Malabar Coast was done between 1965 and 1966, and *Kerala* was published in 1967. A period of ill-health prevented me from returning immediately. I spent the winter of 1967-68 at Lugano in Switzerland, writing about a Victorian naturalist of the Amazons, but in 1969 we were again in India. This time I went with no intention of writing a book, and we lived mainly with our friends, James and Carol George; Jim was then Canadian High Commissioner in Delhi, and he and Carol installed us in a kind of apartment in the residency from which we could make our expeditions to the Tibetan settlements in northern and southern India that we had helped to organize. I was, I have since thought, rediscovering the innocent encounter in yet another way, through

practical and largely physical work to help that sad symbolic figure of our age, the refugee. I wrote nothing about this work that I wanted to preserve, though I may eventually do so. But, curiously, when I returned home I felt the need to produce something that would form a kind of period to our Indian decade, and when Frank Kermode asked me to write the volume on Gandhi in the *Modern Masters* series he was editing, it seemed singularly appropriate that I should end where I began.

I agreed, and wrote the little book, *Mohandas Gandhi*, my fifth book on India, which turned out to be less a biography than a discursive essay, almost a disguised dialogue with the master who had played such an important role in my mental development. I argued that even if India had failed to listen to Gandhi's teaching, it was still alive, lying there like some great mental bomb waiting for the right time to explode into a desperate world. It was a kind of exorcism so far as I was concerned. If the writing of histories had turned my journeys from temporal to spatial ones, the writing of this quasi-biography enabled me to externalize my Indian preoccupations, to project them on the world, and so to become liberated from a long fascination.

This did not mean that I had lost my feeling for India. Far from it. I continued to read Indian books and Indian news, to review Indian writers and Indian events. I took stances and, by now accepted as a minor authority, signed manifestoes during the 1970's protesting against Mrs. Gandhi's actions, acting with a kind of acquired patriotic fury against those who, I felt, were ruining what I had come to regard as an adoptive fatherland. When visitors came from India to Vancouver, whether they were interesting strangers like Nirad Chaudhuri, or friends — old friends by now — like the Dalai Lama or Balachandra Rajan — I welcomed them like fellow countrymen. Yet for a decade I travelled to other places, in the South Pacific and Europe, led partly by circumstance and opportunity, partly by a feeling that a cycle in my life was ended.

BUT IT IS A BASIC ASSUMPTION of Indian philosophies that cycles repeat themselves, that one's past returns to influence, if not to haunt one. And one of those strange and compelling clusters of circumstances that Jung calls synchronicity eventually awakened in me the urge (perhaps even, if one sees it in Indian eyes, the karmic necessity) to return.

India began calling in its debts when Patwant Singh, one of the two Indians who had opened the country to me in 1961, reappeared almost twenty years later, a man transformed. In the past he had looked with eyebrows raised almost to the rim of his turban at our efforts to help Tibetan refugees; he was a young man

engaged with life and all its prides and pleasures and thus in full accord with Indian concepts of the stages of personality development. Now, a man advancing into late middle age, he came not only to share with me an indulgent viewing of our younger selves, but also to tell how experience had brought him to another of the Indian stages of life: that of a man who assumes humane responsibilities.

A heart attack, in which Patwant had received the treatment of a privileged city man, had brought the compassionate vision of a peasant in the same predicament, far from a hospital and doomed to die. He thought of a network of small health centres, scattered in the remote village regions of India to give relief in just such emergencies and even to prevent them. He resolved to build such a centre as a model, and as soon as he recovered he bullied a state government into giving him a stretch of barren land, charmed his architect friends into designing a hospital he could build cheaply from local fieldstone, recruited sympathetic doctors and nurses, called on his vast circle of friends for funds, and set up his centre in Haryana state, not merely as a hospital, but as a multi-functional facility intended to change the quality of life in the villages.

What Patwant did with his Kabliji Hospital and Rural Health Centre is too complex a tale for this essay, to which its main relevance is that it gave me a reason to return again to India. Inge and I and a few other people established a Canada India Village Aid Society to spread the idea of village regeneration — in sanitation, in local industry, in family planning, in the liberation of women — that Kabliji encapsuled. For me it revived in practical form the Gandhian ideals with which I had first gone to India in 1961.

Among the people who became deeply involved with us was the West Coast painter, Toni Onley. One day Toni suggested to me that we might raise money quickly for the hospital if we went to India to prepare a book — his watercolours and my writing — and afterwards sell his paintings into the bargain. I agreed, and in December 1982 we went there together, travelling to the Rajasthani deserts and the Kerala lagoons, to the Himalayan mountains and the temple-studded fields of Orissa, to prepare for my sixth book on India and Toni's first. That is the book we are calling *The Walls of India*. Toni, never having visited India before, has painted, as I once wrote, with the innocent eye. I am involved in the strange experiment of stereoscopy that juxtaposes the eye of innocence to that of experience. But what we both see are walls, and they are not merely the walls of ancient buildings and immemorial mountains. They are the walls of social divisions, of caste and language and region, that were there always but have assumed, in the India where Gandhi sought to level all barriers, a new solidity.

But there are faces within those walls, and as I write they draw near in memory, and imperceptibly the India I left a few months ago with a great deal of sadness

mingles with the India I knew first a third of a lifetime ago. The newness is gone, the brightness is dimmed, the faces are older and more disillusioned. The walls are those of an old home seen again, like childhood, with the clear grey eye of homecoming.

