

MYTHO - TECHNO

The following two anecdotes are true stories, which occurred over the course of a train journey through India, during the summer of 1992. They both point out ironies experienced in the culture of the Other, the recognition of which is an essential aspect of travel.

Technology Transfer: the Computer Check-in

The approach to Bombay from the aeroport reveals a section through the most impoverished conditions imaginable - driving past the shanty towns of plastic and straw, the monochrome soot-coloured forms of shelter and inhabitants are reminiscent of 19th century chimney-sweeps. Pedestrians pushing carts laden with goods vie with bicycle delivery boys and every type of motor vehicle possible; old cars and taxis, buses and scooters (with or without sidecars) jockey for position amidst a throng of beeping horns and revving engines. From this vantage, following the serpentine flow and avoiding the chaos of oxen and vehicles, my most vivid memory is still the pungent stench of human excrement and fermenting garbage under the noonday heat.

And yet, this entire late 20th century caravan moves forward, past the road builders flinging pick-axes in the thirty-five degree humidity, past the women supporting pails of spilling water atop their heads, past the sleeping beggars, whose families search the ground for food with their coal-black piercing eyes. On several occasions we make eye contact, and someone who will never be able to travel to Delhi, let alone Montréal, displays a chalk-white smile or waves a hand in recognition. In recognition of what, I ask myself?

I commence a universal game by mimicking the gestures of a child, who is sporting sunglasses, riding in the car ahead of our taxi. He is one of half a dozen who are crammed into the rear seat of a hatchback, precariously moving forward, as we communicate through this little game we've invented. Copying each of my movements, he is finally outwitted as I unclip the sun shades from my glasses, a gesture which he cannot duplicate with his plastic Raybans. The six children roar with laughter at our little game, retaining this most remarkable gift of wonder.

We are finally let out at the Garden Hotel in Colaba, a well-to-do epicentre of Bombay. Arriving in a palatial courtyard and tired from our long journey, our real travels in India are only about to begin. We follow the doorman as he carries our bags into the lobby, and are welcomed by a long counter, behind which stand several Indian gentlemen. I remark that there is a large IBM compatible sitting on the hotel check-in desk.

"Would we care for a room?" the first hotel employee inquires, as he straightens his tie and informs us that a room for three persons is 1040 rupees, roughly \$32.00 per night.

"Yes," I reply.

The head clerk, who is standing in front of the computer, turns to the second employee and requests a room for three. This gentleman picks up a pen and asks the third employee to record our entry. The third clerk opens a huge ledger and proceeds to record our passport numbers and places of residence. This gentleman then shouts room 312, and a fourth employee, who is dressed in labourer's clothes, reaches behind him towards a large key-board matrix and detaches our room key from the hook. He then hands this key to the fifth man, who moves hurriedly around in front of the counter while clapping his hands, calling aloud to the sixth man who arrives to continue carrying our bags up to our room. We are already familiar with this sixth man, since he was the first man who greeted us upon arrival in the courtyard.

Finally, we all pile into a tiny elevator - the three of us, the sixth man struggling with four large rucksacks, and the seventh man whose job is to operate the elevator up to the third floor. I imagine that, eventually, our reservation was put into the computer that sat silently upon the counter as we checked-in to the hotel. Compared to our streamlined check-in system, where a sole clerk coordinates the entire hotel with one handy laptop, the Indian social structure still demands that everyone play a role in the event.

It is 3:00 p.m. as I stretch out on the double bed, fan purring overhead and refrigerator motor droning in the corner of the room. After tea and soft drinks are delivered via room service, I wash my face with tea and decide to rest until sundown, waking to the appearance of a purple-rose sky, amidst rooftops speckled with heads peering out over the street.

This first encounter epitomized Indian culture's use of Western technology. We had been in India exactly two hours.

TRAVELS IN INDIA

Mythology Transfer: the Flying Baby

While Pepsi, Walkmans, Western cinema and television dominate the reveries of most Indians more than they do my own, the local dweller, accustomed to squatting close to the land in his rural setting, looks conspicuously out of place squatting on the molten asphalt of Bombay, Delhi, or Calcutta - a product of mixed signals.

Being immersed in Indian culture, a culture rich in mythology and storytelling, would account for the strangest conversation having taken place twice in the past five days in two separate towns. Upon informing local merchants that we are from Canada, they recount a recent story published in an Indian journal which shows a photograph of a Canadian baby born with wings. Evidently, Canadian doctors are fascinated by the little Icarus, but his mother is afraid that he will fly away. The second person, who recounted this marvellous incident while I was sitting in his carpet shop in Rajasthan, elaborated that the baby could go and get his mother fresh fruit from anywhere in the world, although he had to be wary of big birds in Canada that could potentially hurt him. When I suggested to both *raconteurs* that this story was possibly a fiction, they emphatically replied:

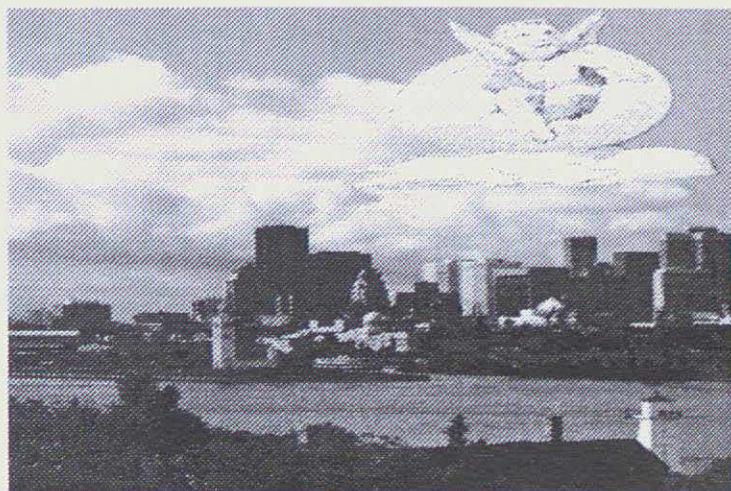
"Hearing story is one thing, but on seeing photograph, we have to believe."

"Have you seen him?" one excited assistant to the carpet-bagger wondered out loud.

I played innocent and apologized for having left Canada to go abroad before the flying baby was born. Nor had I seen the photograph of my angel compatriot while travelling in the Indian subcontinent.

"You don't happen to have the newspaper article lying around anywhere, do you?" I inquired casually.

"Yes, yes, of course - it is somewhere in the shop," we were assured. Several assistants proceeded to search high and low for the photograph as we sat sipping spiced Kashmir tea and looking at carpet designs. We soon departed with new carpet in tow, having been once more seduced by consumerism, but without a single pixel of proof of the flying baby phenomenon.



Sighting of the Flying Baby from Canada
Times of India, Monday, July 11, 1992

Throughout the rest of our journey, I was convinced that they had seen the story in an Indian version of the *National Enquirer*, but still could not discount the fact that we were among a people actively steeped in mythology, which I hold in deepest respect. After all, in the west, we invented Icarus and the Minotaur. The Hindus represent equivalent images in the characters of Hanuman (the flying monkey-god) and Ganesha (the elephant-headed, 'monstrous' progeny of Siva and Parvati). Considering that the Hindu pantheon houses more than 33,000 gods, what is one more baby bird added to the lexicon of Canadian deities?

Several months after returning to Canada, an Indian friend found a copy of the seminal photograph, and was kind enough to forward the image, which is reproduced above. I have been watching the Canadian skies for flying babies ever since.

Terrance Galvin is an Adjunct Professor at the McGill School of Architecture. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania.