

India's magic contrasts

BANGALORE — I am visiting one of New Delhi's splendid mogul forts. A very old man dressed in rags comes up to me. He gives a sweet, almost beatific and quite toothless smile, and offers me all he has in the world to sell: One tiny blue flower.

This is the India you want to take in your arms and protect, the India of Mother Teresa.

India is fast becoming a major exporter of computer software. New plants in Punjab and around Bombay are turning out some of the most modern electronic hardware. In the pleasant southern city of Bangalore, I inspected Hindustan aeronautics factories where Jaguar strike fighters are being built. I delved deeply into the mysteries of computer machine tools and forgings.

This is the modern India.

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Bhopal — the unlucky city. There, a student from Kenya was diagnosed as having AIDS, one of 22 cases in India. A bit behind the times, India is now gripped with its own AIDS panic. The lovely Kenyan, it seems, dallied with six of Bhopal's "bigwigs," what Indian calls their top government nabobs. She is required by law to disclose the names of her paramours, something that is causing rich embarrassment to the city elders.

And as if this wasn't bad enough, next came the woeful tale of another African student, the unfortunate Wilberforce Kissinger Vamatuba. He died last week in Bhopal, apparently of AIDS. Panic erupted when it was learned he was kept in a general hospital ward and the needles used to give him shots were also used on other patients.

Bombay is India's big Chapatti, a combination of New York and Hollywood. Almost a third of India's commerce passes through Bombay, which by anyone's standards is a true world-class city. In fact, for Arabians, Bombay is a sort of second Paris — without the snotty waiters. Bombay is where India's booming film industry churns out the celluloid fantasy epics that are the only escape for India's masses.

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In between interviews, I stopped in to see the house in New Delhi where Mahatma Gandhi spent the last 144 days of his life. There, on a simple low cot, he fasted to the edge of death in order to

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stop the murderous communal violence between Hindus and Muslims. As he had done in Calcutta, Gandhi somehow stopped the carnage and brought Indians to their senses.

Then I walked out into the garden and followed Gandhi's footsteps to the place where he was shot and killed by a Hindu fanatic. A simple stone marks the spot where the Mahatma, or "great spirit" fell. Another stone carries an inscription from Albert Einstein who said that future generations, looking back on Gandhi's works, would never believe such a man of mere flesh and blood could have walked this earth.

Prophets are never heroes in their own countries and Indians have a lot of bad things to say of Gandhi. He was a devilishly clever old fox, a wily politician and a great motivator. But I think he was also the closest thing we will ever know to a genuine saint. Christ might have been a man very much like Gandhi.

As I was getting ready to leave, an Indian gentleman came up, introduced himself, and asked me to please come and visit him next time I was in his home town, which happened to be Lusaka, Zambia. I suppose we were both moved by the ecumenical spirit of the Mahatma. I assured him I would stop in on my next visit to Lusaka.

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I met a very pale-looking Canadian diplomat. One of her jobs was to arrange for the bodies of Canadians who die in India to be shipped back home. Another was to go to remote spots to console and assist free-spirited Canadians who had been thrown into local dungeons on drug charges. Such work took her to obscure and often unhygienic spots.

"I caught parasites from my bath water once," she told me. "Another time, I was at a reception when a roach jumped out from the rice on my plate." She had been poisoned, infected or otherwise afflicted many, many times. When I saw her, she was taking two powerful drugs for some newly acquired parasites. Poor woman. Standing on guard for Canada is one thing, but who said anything about pit bull roaches?

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Canadians, I am pleased to report, are widely and truly liked everywhere in India. And why not? Canada has done a lot to help, usually with few or even no strings attached. Everyone seems to have relatives either in Mississauga, Vancouver or Calgary. John Diefenbaker is remembered with respect, Pierre Trudeau with curiosity tinged with scandal. Canada is the land of riches, run by decent, honest people. Not a bad reputation in our less-than-perfect world.