

True Tales of a Traveller Series

06: Culture Shock

It was at this same hostel, a mere 48 hours later that I pulled out one of the ten or so chairs at the long table on the courtyard-like rooftop area, sat down and prepared to write a letter to Melanie in my airmail writing pad. There was a dormitory constructed one storey higher than this courtyard, but it didn't block the late autumn sunshine, which was not uncomfortable. The entrance to this family-run rooftop hostel was just five or six metres away; I could hear the father talking in Hindi with his teenage son there, but couldn't see them.

Nobody else was around at this time. Michel had gone to see some of the sights of the city on his own; Ken, the Japanese guy who had shared our room for the first two nights had left Delhi for Assam, and all the other guests seemed to be busy with other things. But I didn't mind that at all. This was the first quiet moment I had to myself since I had arrived, and I decided to make the most of it and catch up on letter writing.

Dear Melanie, I wrote, and stopped there.

Wait a minute, I said to myself, why should I be calling her "Dear"? This was the girl I had been chasing in England, the same one who had revealed that she had a boyfriend only days before my flight to India; a country I originally had no interest in that she had to take the credit for persuading me to visit. 'Hello Melanie' would have been a better opening. But it was too late. I didn't want to scribble out "Dear" and replace it with "Hello", that really would be pressing a point to far. So I let it pass. But there were at least three points I was not prepared to let pass...

The first was her claim of dire poverty of the country. The second was that I would need to prepare myself for the 'culture shock' of travelling in India. And the third was her unwelcome suggestion that I should spend my time in India doing some sort of voluntary work; as she had done at Mother Teresa's charity organisation in Calcutta.

Dear Melanie,
Greetings from India! I've been here in Delhi for three days now.

Wait! That couldn't be right. *Three days?* How could it possibly be just three days, I asked myself? I ran my mind over the events of the time since the plane had arrived in Delhi. The first night I had stayed at that awful hotel the clueless rickshaw driver had taken us to; last night and the night before I had stayed at the hostel. Surely, there had to be something missing here, I asked myself? It felt closer to three months than three days, and certainly at least three weeks.

I almost stopped writing there and then. Three days didn't seem a period long enough to be writing 'home' about. But I had already started my letter. I decided to finish it.

So, what about the poverty, I asked myself? At the time I talked to Melanie about the poverty, I had told her that I had already seen plenty of poverty in places like Egypt. I thought again about the awful bed-bug hotel of the first night, and it was surely true that I could think of places equally bad elsewhere; places I had travelled to before India. But then another comparison sprang to mind.

While sitting on a grassy embankment on the Nile in Luxor, Egypt, two years previously, Jeanette, my travel companion, had pointed out to me that a middle-aged man in a galibea about 25 or 30 metres away was defecating 'in public'. At first, I had disagreed, thinking he was merely squatting in the way most un-Westernised people did, rather than sitting down directly on the lawn. But when he rose, it was apparent that Jeanette had been right!

But that was the only occasion I had seen anything like that in urban Egypt. On the other hand, and my second morning in Delhi, I had made the mistake of walking to the nearby Old Delhi Railway Station to check travel times for my planned trip to Darjeeling. It turned out I had gone to the wrong station; I should have gone to New Delhi Station. As I walked away from the station, my eyes wondered to an area on the other side of the railway lines, an area of wasteland, where there were literally dozens, perhaps even hundreds of people in the process of emptying their bowels! Men, women and children, with the morning paper being the mens' favoured tool for relaxation while they were at it. I had never seen anything like that in my life!

I turned my mind back to the letter. I supposed I had to grudgingly admit that Melanie had been right about the poverty. I had never been in anywhere where hundreds of local residents could be seen using a patch of unused land as a public toilet. For so many people to have no access to toilets; that was true poverty. I continued my letter:

Well, I guess you were right about the poverty; the poverty here is pretty dire in places. As for the so-called 'culture shock' you warned me about, though,

Did any other of my experiences since arriving in Delhi constitute 'culture shock', I asked myself?