

India and Nepal

To escape the heat we decide to take a flight to Calcutta but to our dismay Calcutta is even hotter and much more miserable for its humanity.

From the first as we walked from the airport to catch a bus into town (rather than pay a taxi or use a tourist bus) we had to cross a vacant lot. Not vacant however, people lived here in tin and cardboard humpies – huts made from rubbish. An old woman moves slowly in the searing heat, black can in hand and a skinny dog at her heel. Not a pretty sight.

We found a bus and were soon bumping along trying to look out the windows through the arms and legs. A woman in beautiful silk robes sits expressionless across from us. The bus is packed, crammed with Indian men in white baggy pants and shirts. One spoke very good English but never seemed to give us satisfactory answers to our questions.

We stay at the Salvation Army Red Shield Hotel for 10.5 Rps each (including breakfast), it had bed bugs. We were not far from Calcutta market and were fascinated by the huge variety of goods for sale. I remember walking out across the street to this market to change \$100A. The sun was fierce. At last I hit the shade and was swallowed by the jumble of stalls. The idea was to use the black market to get a better exchange rate than the official one. I was soon confronted by a man with a boy-like face with 'change money mister?' After a lot of time and bargaining I found a buyer for my dollars. Trapped in a tiny room at the back of a stall somewhere in Calcutta market with \$100Am cash in my pocket and four men between me and the door is not a safe feeling, and my mind flickered over what the consequences would be if they were criminal types. They could simply

produce a knife and rob me, or worse. But I was lucky and made a deal without mishap. Whether it's a consequence of British rule, the Indians seem very passive. After a time one feels if one shouted they would all fall back in terror.

And so we began the Indian leg of our trip. What stuck us was the intense poverty. Without having been in India one cannot conceive how poor these people actually are. The second thing which struck us was the heat. It kills the spirit - we felt positively exhausted. Another impression is the crushing force of sheer population.

Naked children and a semi-covered mother in a hessian bag which is totally impregnated with dust and dirt sit and stare with empty eyes. People walk around and over them without heed. Some of these unfortunates lie spread-eagled on the barren dirt, bare skin covered with dry dust. The dirt and skin are one colour, same texture, same dryness, but they are people, I want to scream. A baby sucks at a dry concave breast, dirt baby. It getting dark and they haven't moved all day and will surely be here tomorrow. How do they live? What do they eat? But not just a couple, there are hundreds of them here. Outcasts. A cow walks past and eats. They make me feel guilty to be alive. We know it will be so in Calcutta after we leave as it was years before we arrived. If we were instantly transported to this place we would still see the wretchedness. The rich in India claim there is no caste system! They stun us in their silk, black shining hair oiled and braided, clothes spotless, gold on ears and fingers, wealthy beyond measure - as are we in our self-made ignorance.

We walk out of the guest-house gate on the second day, lines of people stretch the length of the road. These are the poor. They own only what they hold - a filthy rag and tin. The

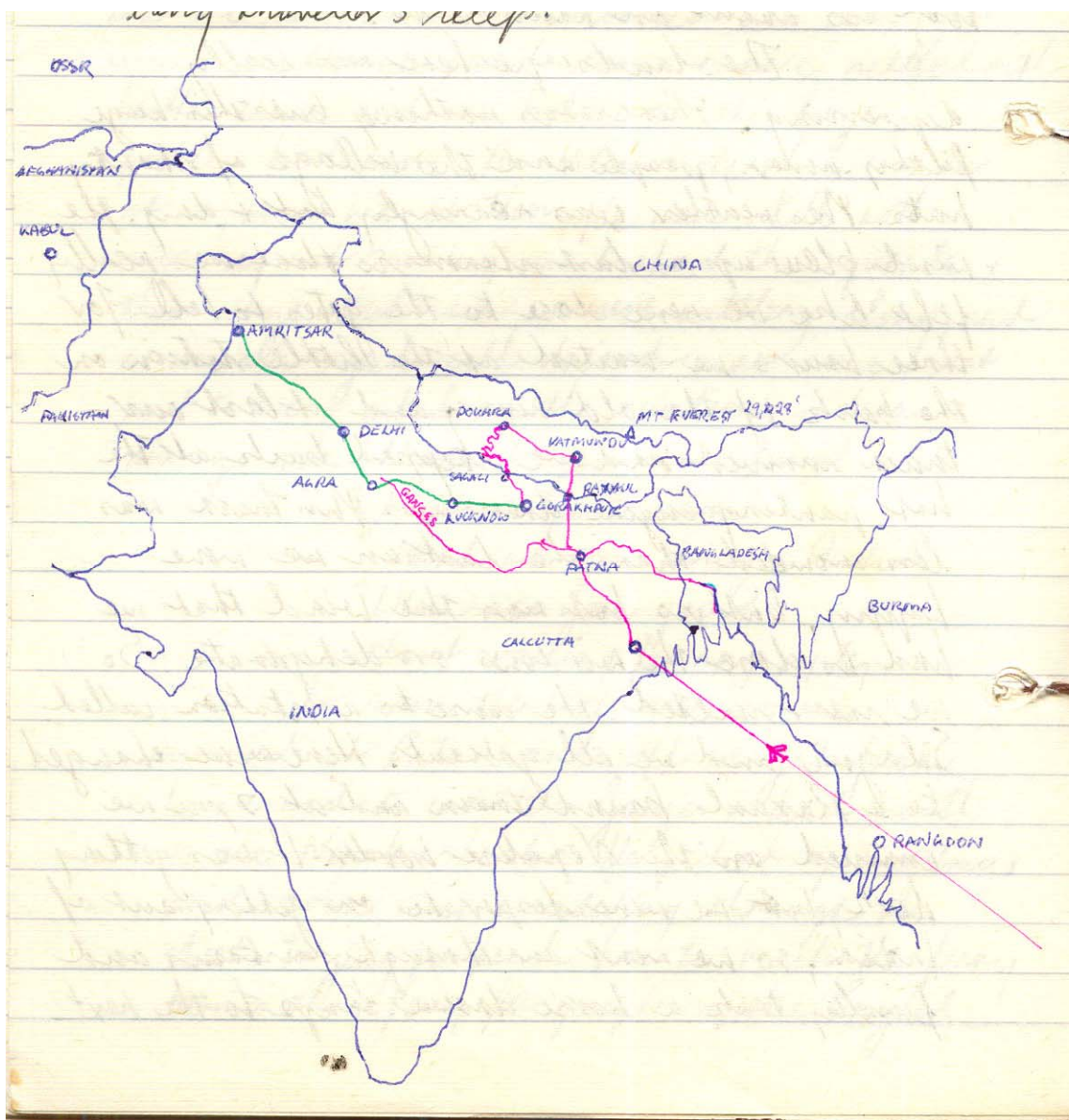
clothes are all same shade of dirt brown. They wait for a ration of thin stew of watery rice slopped into each sad vessel and go away content. This is life. It makes you want to scream.

Now began our first Indian train ride. The rail introduced by the British is exactly as they left it. The engines are steam/coal and all is typically British. Diesel is unknown and it amazes me the system has not broken down long ago. The only thing that holds it together as far as I could see is that the British instilled their way of life on the Indians totally. They seem to think as Englishmen do as far as rail goes anyway.

Calcutta central station for all its organization still looked a shambles as we entered it on night of April 17th. We took a tram to reach the station and with some luck found the place. The amount of people in this huge building (British style of course) was fantastic. The place seethed with masses of dark skinned, white clad Indians of all castes and religions. The platforms were packed with beggars, vendors and travelers who sat squatting with luggage tied in a cloth! We found the correct platform after asking many officials in worn-out British uniforms and found our third-class carriage. We clambered inside and found the seats could be converted into beds (with wooden mattresses) Luxury. We soon settled in with Heather above and me below in this large public bedroom. The Indians stared in wonder at us, and we at them. We were still rather uneasy not knowing much about these people and their ways. But soon we were rattling along and a middle-aged well-dressed man came and sat next to me. The inevitable questions began, 'Where do you come from? What is your name? What are you doing in India? Where are you going' without waiting for a reply.

At 5am we arrived at Patna. From here we had to cross the Ganges to head north to Nepal. We picked up our bags and were soon wandering through the streets trying to find how to reach the ferry terminal. Very few people spoke English so we had some trouble. Finally we found the building and soon were on a large paddle-boat heading upstream. The crossing took an hour or so.

The landscape here was really depressing. There was nothing but this huge filthy river, people and a village of shanty huts. The weather was searing hot and dry. The wind picked up and blew up a dust storm so we felt like we were close to the gates of hell. We waited in the heat for three hours in a little station for our train, on the bank of the old river. At last our train arrived and we stepped back from the panting engine as it drew up. This train was less crowded which made us happy, but it was so hot we had to close the windows to stop the hot wind dehydrating us! So we sat and sweltered. Australia has nothing on India. Eventually we arrived at Silagri and changed trains for Raxaul. By 7pm we had arrived at the Nepalese border. It was getting dark but we were desperate on getting out of Indian heat. Through customs we went and took a horse drawn trap to the next town -5km away and Nepal. As soon as we could we found a hotel. The night was cold and we slept, a beautiful travelers sleep. We had not seen a European since Calcutta and this place felt like the end of the world.

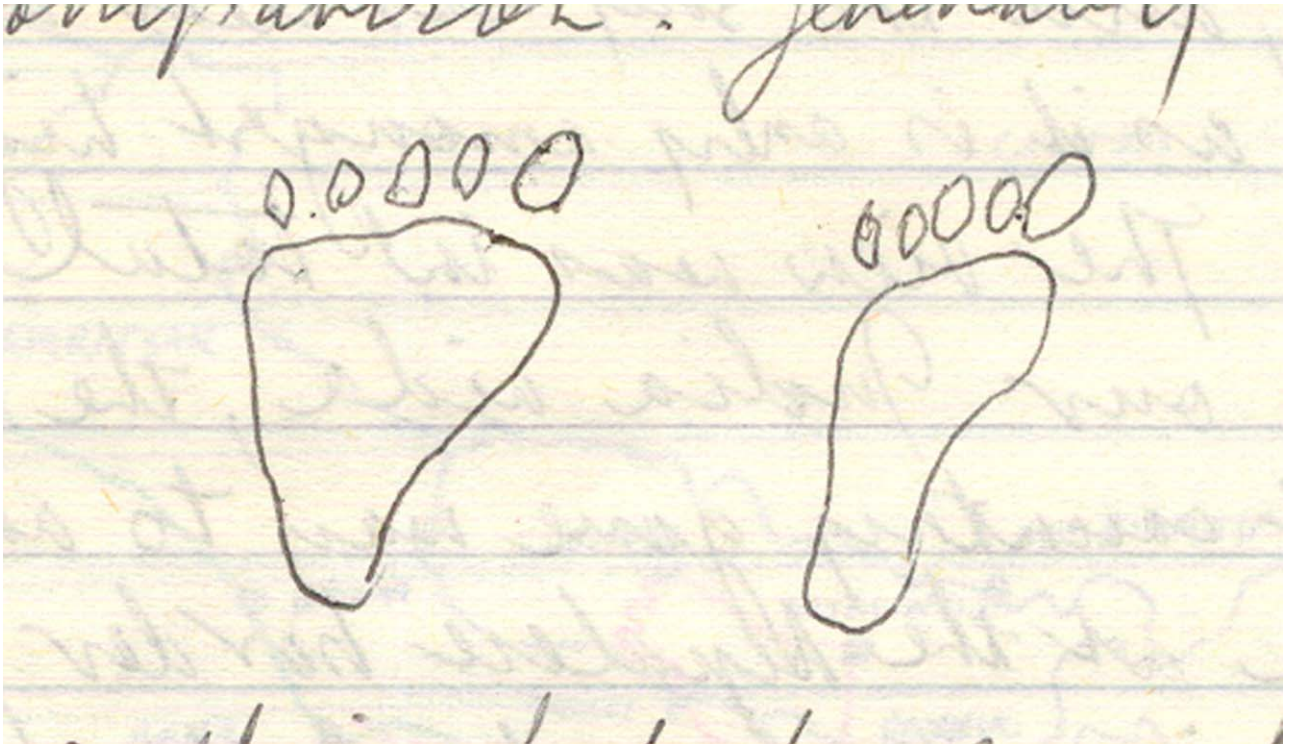


Nepal - land of milk and hashish

They told us Nepal was mountainous but this was beyond all expectation. In comparison to all we had seen prior to the Himalayas were mere hills. The road wound its way around, up and over to 9000ft at one pass. The sky was clear the sun warm, as it is only in high mountains, the view a total

contrast to our Indian ride. Boring endless flat had given way to an abrupt rise at the Nepalese border. The mountains stuck out of the brown sad land.

We drove for an hour and at the first village we stopped and bought weird looking drinks in thick ancient glass bottles, with glass ball stoppers (*see bottom right of hand-written page India map previous*). To drink you had to push the ball into the contents. At other place we drank 'chai' – Nepalese tea complete with buffalo milk and heaps of sugar cooked over a little earthen oven usually in an ancient kettle. It tasted great – a bit like billy tea – well boiled.



The Nepalese are a broad, strong, stocky and large footed race. I compared their bare footprints with mine. There's were triangular in comparison. Generally the villagers wore bare feet, and I heard they did the same in winter's snow and traveling on icy slopes. Sounds doubtful to me. I would like to see them get their feet into my shoes though!

The Nepalese women like the Indian women like to wear jewellery in their noses, but the Nepalese wear far more. The older well-off women wear multiple gold ear rings in rows with obviously many painful piercings. Silk was not worn however, instead wore thick tight fitting jackets over a wide belly binding, never very colourful. They were also a happy race in contrast to the Indians and seemed to enjoy their lives. They are not good bus travelers however and often become very ill, often vomiting from the windows. Yum.

As we headed for Katmandu the weather became so pleasant several young Europeans and ourselves decided the interior of the little gaudily painted bus was too stifling (which Asian bus isn't). As the driver topped up his radiator from a spring we climbed on the roof and sat perched among the luggage. We literally felt we were on top of the world! We lay back and let the sun and wind hit our faces. The surrounding hills looked unbelievable. At one time we would look across at a valley floor thousands of feet below and next look up at the peak of the monster we were moving across held its head against the sun. Everywhere the Nepalese had terraced. Tiny strips of land as far as the eye could see, giving each huge shape the look of a relief map. These fields were not rice but native barley, and were cultivated in the typically Asian method of water buffalo and hand plough. In places like this one needs a camera (which we didn't have) but the scale would have been entirely lost. *(We had elected not to take cameras because the idea of pushing lenses into people's faces didn't appeal and we travelled light, one bag 20cm x 25 x 15 cm for both of us)*

After an 11 hour haul we rumbled into Katmandu and as is usual in Asia, were flooded with requests on where we

should stay. We ended up in the “Cock and Bull” hotel/restaurant at 10rps including breakfast.

Food in Katmandu tastes good but don't visit the kitchens, hygiene is a word the Nepalese simply don't comprehend.

We spent a week in Katmandu and could very easily have spent more time. The streets are extremely noisy and dusty, most of the buildings are two storey and made of intricately carved wood. Temples are scattered frequently throughout the city which give the place a real eastern atmosphere. A bead seller sits next to a fruit seller – or maybe a loud noisy yoghurt seller who holds his merchandise upside down to display to you how good its quality is because it doesn't fall out of its earthenware container. We bob in and out of tiny shops peering at hand-made boots or turquoise necklaces, and the little grey headed and bearded owner comes over to help and size us up.

One day we visited the “Monkey temple” climbing hundreds of steps to the summit where offerings had just been showered on the bands of monkeys that live here in luxury. One of them tried to steal our lunch and it took quite a bit of courage to frighten him off. Incense burns in tiny niches from which exquisite hand carved Buddha's peer.

Another day we hired bicycles and treadled out into the countryside. We took a close look at handmade bricks being unstacked from a brick stack kiln. These were days which made traveling enjoyable and all the hardship worthwhile.

We rode through a field of wheat and passed a group of grazing buffalo, then rode up a hill to find an entire village which made its living from pottery making. Pots varying from simple cooking pots to huge storage jars where all

handmade on huge stone wheels which were spun with a pole and balanced on a pointed stick. This place was away from the tourist beat and we were the only Europeans.

Having tasted 'city' life in Nepal we decided to move to Pokra, a tiny village in western Nepal which we had heard about. The road had been newly made (by hand-crushing one stone at a time) and financed by the Chinese. It was during this bus-ride I learn the amazing potency of Nepalese stinging nettles (ablutions by the side of the road) on ones bottom.

Pokra was a pretty spot with a lake and view of the massive Himalayas. Although a hundred miles away they looked like huge ice-blocks rising over the nearby wooded hills. The peaks white, with feathers of cloud breaking and condensing the air.

We took a room in a tiny hotel and ate at an outside roadside restaurant with bamboo poles and thatched roof. The native Nepalese diet consists of the inevitable white rice with curry and 'dahl', a bit like pea soup and tasty. Chai is always served.

Having spent a week and a half in Nepal we again decided to move on in our quest to reach Europe in time to meet Ian and Marjatta in Rhodes in May. Rhodes seemed very far from us, it was already April and we were in fact only half-way to Greece. The road out of Nepal was even more terrifying than the road in. This road was less travelled and followed the valleys south. These so called 'valleys' had walls almost 90degrees to the horizontal.

Roads are a source of wonder in Nepal. It is a common sight to see whole villages, men women and children squatting

nonchalantly by the wayside, each with a little iron hammer breaking up large rocks into smaller ones and the small ones into gravel. This is how the 'blue-metal' is produced. There are no mechanized rock-crushers in this land! The idea is probably to give some Nepalese work and to show an example of Chinese communist "help" to a "struggling" nation. Bridges are large, well designed and the road, fast.

Landslides on this road south are common and our hearts were in our mouths more than once as the bus negotiated recent falls, slowly advancing up and over the rubble on the very edge of an immense chasm. Moreover the road was extremely narrow – unlike the Chinese road, and there was no room for mistake. With luck and many quiet prayers we managed to come down again into the sweltering heat of India without mishap.

India continued...

We crossed the border to find ourselves without transport and alone in an Indian village. We could not find a means of communication or transport. We needed a place to sleep, one bus-ride like we had just been on was enough for one day. We ate in a Punjabi restaurant and began searching. The proprietor of this place, an ancient Punjabi with huge white handlebar moustache and very dark skin under a grey/white turban offered us a place to sleep. After surveying the abode we decided against the offer. These people knew we could not camp out and were at their mercy. After looking at a second room we decided to move on. The railway station was not far away and we found it to be a hive of activity (we thought it would be a lonely place in such a remote village). To our good fortune the station-master said we could catch a train to Gorakpur. This place was on the main line to Agra and the Taj Mahal, so we bought tickets. We were so exhausted by this time I cannot remember the

train trip clearly. It was I think similar to the Patna/Raxual run, where the carriages had no lights. We sat close to each other quietly hoping that all would be peaceful in the darkness. We arrived at Gorakpu at midnight. Things were getting desperate. The idea of walking out into this unknown city in the middle of the night was not inspiring. Luck was with us. There were station rooms available and for 13.50 rps we slept on clean linen sheets in a clean room above the station, luxury.

We arrived at Lucknow at 6.30pm next day, again with a feeling of uneasiness, this place just teemed with people. We decided to continue to Agra and it took us an hour to find the line out. In fact we found we had to cross to another railway station a block or so away. To this day I cannot understand why two separate stations were built so close to each other without connecting. After procuring our tickets we trekked off to the station dining area to eat. Our diet had been scanty since leaving Katmandu and the board read in English; "Roast beef with assorted vegetables" "Apple pie" "scones with cream and strawberry jam" "tea and coffee" and a host of other scrumptious titbits. To our dismay this sign had been there since colonial days and so we had to choose between the inevitable chappatis and rice with dahl. We drank water to cool our burned mouths. That day I swore I would not eat curry again after leaving India. The mere smell was enough.

We badly needed a sleeper and all sleepers had been booked for days in advance. We had heard that if the ticket collector was given a rupee or two we could get a snooze. So we climbed into a sleeper carriage and lay down on a bed and waited. Finally the ticket collector arrived, he took our tickets and nothing more was said, so we got our snooze.

The Taj is a beautiful piece of Moslem workmanship, superb in fact, solid marble inlaid with semi-precious stones. The road to reach it is another story however. The Taj is the past, the glorious past of India in its heyday, but the encampments of disease stricken beggars along-side the road, the blood-chilling vultures in leafless trees and the empty river beside the Taj is India at present. We walked down a filthy street, a cow blocking our way, beggar children clutching our clothes and found relief in a cheap hotel room.

Currency which is torn or pierced is useless in India. As we entered the Red Fort I attempted to pass one such note. After much argument we found that to accept such a note one had to find a way of passing it on.

New Delhi is not like most of India. The streets are well laid out and there are many modern buildings. One night here we were befriended by a couple of Punjabis who told us they were leaders of an Ashram. Being inquisitive we decided to go with them, or at least I did. Heather was suspicious from the start. We were driven around the city for about an hour in a little Indian model car, eventually we entered a military barracks. Smooth talking and a stop at the old city to buy whiskey told me Heather was probably correct. They took us to an empty stadium and invited us to get out and follow them but there is nothing more threatening than a large dark empty place in India. We decided to stay put in the car. With reluctance, our hosts recommenced driving and with luck I recognized a street we had been in earlier that day. I spoke softly to Heather and we made a break for it among the night traffic leaving our 'friends' in the car. Goodness knows how close we had been to our final ends.

We ate well in New Delhi at a French restaurant. The trick was to emerge at night when the weather had cooled. Day was spent entirely lying on hemp rope beds with wet sarongs draped over our bodies. The over-head fan switched on.

Soon we were on our way to Amritsar on the border of Pakistan, centre of the Seihk religion.

On these train trips we had to fill our water bottle with boiling water then wet the outside to make the contents cool. We had water 'purification' tablets but these made the water taste like swimming pool mixture. Heat was so intense and evaporation so strong at this time, we simply had to join the Indians in the mad rush to the water pump when the train stopped momentarily at small stations. The Indians used earthenware vessels for this purpose and each family or group would keep the important vessel under the seat. Tea could also be bought, hot and refreshing and served in little handmade earthenware cups sans handles, which after use would be thrown out the window. The tracks were terracotta coloured with broken teacup shards.

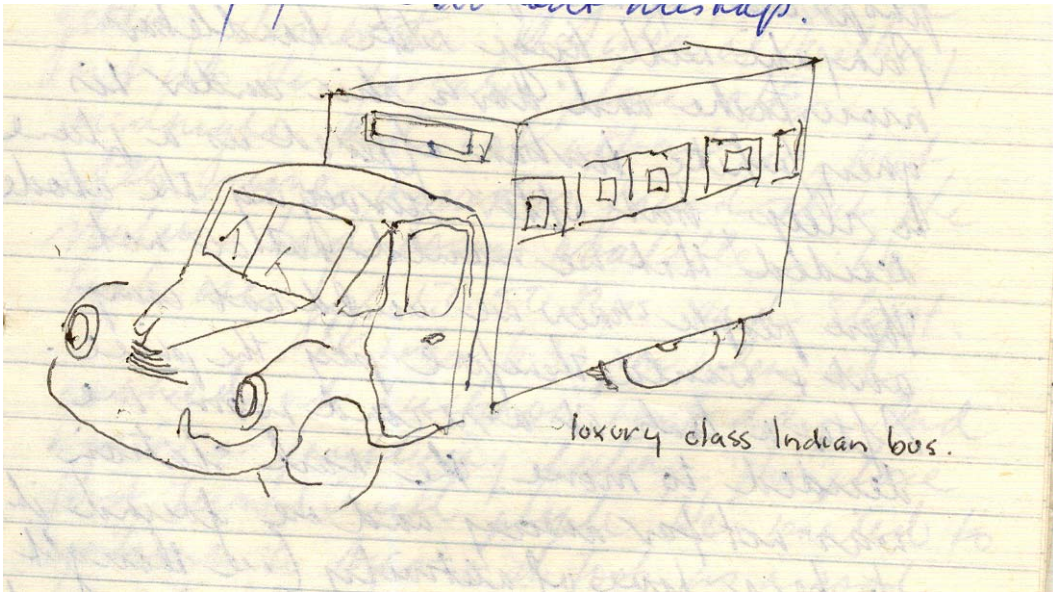
Beggars, each with their own particular gimmick for attracting attention would also climb on board on entering a station, some getting off as the train moved off and others staying aboard. There were musicians (I particularly remember a very young boy who played a percussion instrument which was strapped to his chest playing a kind of Jew's harp while singing. With a big smile he bounced from carriage to carriage always thankful for a small coin). Other beggar entertainers stood almost naked except for a rag. Then bend backward onto their hands under the full blazing sun on the hot track stone ballast in the hope a coin would be tossed from a window. A blind beggar let out an eerie moan from another compartment – pity would be his method.

At Amritsra we stayed in an area reserved for travelers at the Golden Temple, centre of Seikism. Both young Europeans and Indians were here. We slept not in the room provided, instead climbed onto the flat roof and slept on the rope Indian beds under the stars.

Next day we visited the temple itself which stool in a man-made lake across which was built a causeway from which a continuous stream of pilgrims watched proceedings.

In the temple a group of musicians played their own brands of Indian music while scribes or priests sat in niches reading ancient scrolls. The interior and exterior was adorned with lavish gold-leaf and precious stones. The place was crowded but we managed to get up the steps and into the next floor where we entered the holiest of places. Here many long beaded priests sat crossed legged in heavily brocaded robes, lips moving in prayer.

Next day we were up early to catch the bus to the border where we remained for many hours while border officials checked us through. Due to political problems the border was open only two days per week. It was a strange feeling carrying our loads across no-mans land.



The last thing I remembered from India was watching a tiny thin donkey carry a complete haystack along the road with driver on top! How it all stayed on without falling off I don't know.

