

.A Tale of Two Cities: Bombay (Mumbai) and Calcutta (Kolkata)

December 2019

On this, my fourth trip to India, the priority was to pay first-time visits to these two great cities (the largest and second-largest in India). As the month-long itinerary worked out, I only ended up with a few days in each as 17 days were spent in the deep south which will be the subject of the next story.

These two cities, Bombay with 23 million people and Calcutta with 14 million have distinctively different personalities, architecture, and, of course, language.

One of the factors of travel in India is the language diversity with 18 different ones recognized in the Constitution, virtually one for every one of its 29 states. Each has its own script as well. So, English is the “Lingua Franca” which is a great help as a traveler. There are several English language newspapers so we were able to keep up with local and international news. The state, Maharashtra, in which Bombay is located, had been without a government for six months since the elections. The night of our return a government was finally formed and by the next morning



billboards posted the photos of the new officials.

Marathi is the language in Bombay and Bengali (or Bangla) is the language in Calcutta. Both date back to the 13th C.

This trip started and ended in Bombay, so-named by the Portuguese in the 16thC, meaning good bay which indeed it was for sailors. At that time, it consisted of 7 islands, now all fused through landfills or connected by bridges, forming

a single peninsula extending from the mainland, bordered by Back Bay and Mumbai Harbour from the Arabian Sea.

The name was changed in 1996 to Mumbai which was from the Marathi language for the goddess Mumba, worshipped by the original residents of the region, the Koli. So, it was appropriate that on the all-day tour we had organized one of the stops was the Sassoon fishing



port docks. The fishermen are primarily Koli. We visited mid-morning after the major fish auctions of the overnight catch had taken place. But one big catch was of the very small, what I call, bay shrimp. Clusters of women were sitting shelling huge quantities of them. They did not want their pictures taken which I, of course, respected while we were walking on the dock but

was later able to catch a photo from the car. As we left the dock, we passed the freezer area with ice-making machines where the catch would be flash frozen and exported, mostly to China. Women were transporting the catch there in basins on their heads.



One of my joys in India is walking the streets because it seems as if that is where life is. As I ventured from our hotel, between the area known as Fort (the Fort having been demolished in 1864 to make way for development), and the main train station, now abbreviated as CST but previously known as Victoria Station, I was struck as always by the sidewalk enterprise. I love the tiny shop fronts where you get your photocopies (a somewhat ancient machine that still works), locksmiths, snacks everywhere, and the shoe guy who is only on the sidewalk without a storefront and not only polishes your shoes but can complete most repairs on the spot! There are also frequent impromptu altars.

The pace of life in India captivates me and causes me to want to return, hopefully in the near future, for a fifth visit. I even love it when I call into customer service for, whatever, and find that I am in an Indian call center and I can hear and sense the energy!



When visiting the Hanging Garden on Malabar Hill (the most exclusive residential area of Bombay overlooking Marine Drive and Back Bay) I learned the history of the Parsi's in India where they fled from religious persecution in Iran. They are Zoroastrians who worship a single deity in agari (fire temples). Because fire and earth are sacred, they neither bury nor cremate their dead but



leave them out on platforms (known as the Tower of Silence) in a large park located down the hill from the Hanging Garden, to be picked over by vultures. The Parsi community is very successful and at 98.6% boasts the highest literary rate in the city. Famous Parsi's include the Tata industrial family, the author Rohinton Mistry (*A Fine Balance*) and British singer Freddie Mercury (Queen). They are also known for their cuisine and as luck would have it, one of the best-known Parsi caf  s, Britannia and Co., was located a few doors away from our hotel. We ate there twice, once on our arrival visit and again on our departure visit.

Another highlight of the day tour was viewing the Mahalaxmi Dhobi Ghat where the men of an entire village beat the dirt out of thousands of kilos of laundry (mostly from schools and hospitals) in more than 900 troughs daily. There had just been a monsoon-type rain storm so most of the area was covered in blue tarps, but you could still see the process.

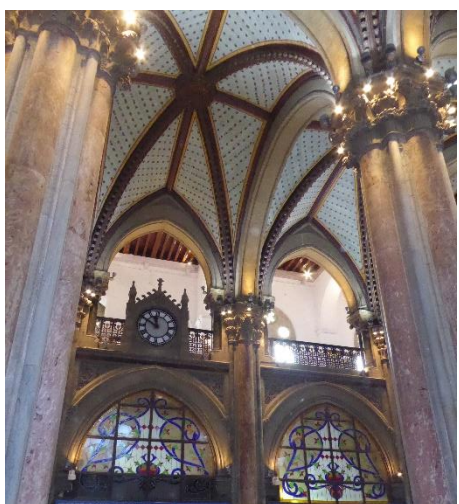


Also just after a rainstorm I viewed the Haji Ali Dargah tomb and mosque which sits on an island connected by a causeway. 80,000 pilgrims of many faiths visit each week, even though it is only accessible at low tide. The 14th C structure was last updated in 2008 with the same marble as the Taj Mahal. (Mosque photo courtesy of Trip Advisor).





I really enjoyed Bombay's colonial architecture, especially the golden local stone from which many of the buildings are constructed. Our closest neighbor was Victoria Station, completed in 1887, 34 years after the first trains in India left the site. It is a mixture of Victorian Gothic, Hindu and Islamic styles with buttresses, turrets, domes and stained glass. It is the busiest train station in Asia serving 3 million passengers daily.



We paid a brief visit to Mani Bhavan, the house where Mahatma Gandhi stayed during visits to Bombay from 1917 to 1934 and where he formulated his philosophy of satyagraha (non-violent protest) and launched the 1932 civil disobedience campaign that led to the end of British rule.



All men are born equal and free.

We walked through the potters' neighborhood in Dharavi "slum". A fascinating variety of industries occur in this area. We saw plastics recycling (60% of Maharashtra State's plastic is processed here) and used car bumpers are re-made for installation on new vehicles at a nearby automotive plant. The plastics are sorted by color and quality, then crushed, washed and laid out to dry on the roofs. They are then melted and molded into pellets. These recycled plastics



cannot be used for toy or food container production. There is a large leather industry and also cardboard box recycling.

It is estimated that 60% of Bombay's population lives in its 300 shantytowns, one million in Dharavi. The annual volume of business conducted in Dharavi is estimated at \$1 billion.

The interior is a maze of narrow alleys with dwellings/shops ranging from corrugated metal to



2-story concrete structures. The people we met on our walk were very friendly and our guide, originally from the slum, still has many relatives there. The potters and their clay come from Gujarat State to the north.



myriad Hindu



They are using molds, rather than throwing on wheels, otherwise the process is the same as I am used to. The most unusual thing to me was

that they are using the thread and cotton cloth waste from the ready-to-wear clothing industry as the fuel for their kilns. A big percentage of their output is for use in the Festivals, especially Diwali.





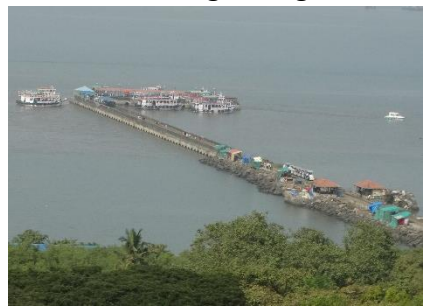
In a significant contrast, we caught a partial glimpse of Antilia, the 27-floor, 103-room, residence of Mukesh Ambani, the richest man in India and 13th on Forbes' list worth \$60 billion due to his Reliance oil and gas empire. It cost \$2 billion when built in 2010.



On the return to Bombay I visited Elephanta Island to see the Shiva temples carved into caves. The highlight is a three-faced 6-meter high God Shiva as destroyer, creator and preserver of the universe. The climb up to the caves is steep



(see view from the top). The stairs are lined with stalls of handicrafts, food and pesky monkeys. One man's job was to keep monkeys out of a restaurant using a slingshot.



I made the mistake of sitting to have a snack on the steps of a temple (a banana of all stupid choices!) and a monkey leapt at me and grabbed it before the guards could stop it.

Laborers were carrying turf and rocks on their heads up the steep slope for a landscaping project.



On the trip I was able to get good photos of Gateway of India, built in the Islamic style of 16th C Gujarat, to commemorate the 1911 Royal Visit of King George V. It was completed in 1924



and just 24 years later was the site from which the last British regiments departed India at its independence. The Indian Navy was holding two days of celebrations with bands and marching.



The Taj Mahal Palace Hotel facing the harbor was built in 1903 by the Parsi industrialist J.M. Tata, supposedly after he was refused entry to one of the European hotels on account of being a “native”.



We treated ourselves twice in Mumbai. The first was for a drink and snack at the Harbour Bar at the Taj Palace where the service was almost non-existent. But it gave me a chance to sample some of India’s vintners. Sula, Fratelli and Grover are creating very nice wines.

Our second treat was our last night when we went to the Central Asian restaurant Peshawri in the five-star ITC Maratha Hotel near the airport. Here the food, service and décor were all superb. And since both my traveling companion and I have spent time in Central Asia (and I will be going there again to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in June) it was a fitting end to a great month together.



We also enjoyed discovering the Khotachiwadi neighborhood near St Teresa's Church. This is a Christian enclave with two-story Portuguese-style wooden dwellings created in the 18th C, nestled into an area now largely surrounded by high rise structures. There is a tiny chapel dating from 1899 with an adjacent beautiful mosaic. Wooden trim and fun courtyards



contribute to the atmosphere.



For all that Mumbai is a study in contrasts, I was impressed by the efforts at adding greenery with living walls, and campaigns to improve the city's cleanliness.



We arrived in Calcutta late in an afternoon following a 30-hour overnight train ride from Bangalore. The first-class sleeper (4 bunks which we two shared with one man, but we had arranged to be assigned the bottom bunks) was comfortable and the service impeccable. Our ticket included full board which meant (since we boarded mid-day) a soup course followed by Indian lunch (a curry, dal, roti and rice) with ice cream for dessert served on TV Table-type foldaway tables. Then about 4 pm tea with biscuits then at 7 pm dinner, Continental or Indian. In the morning, tea is served with a muffin about 7 am then breakfast about 8 am (Continental with an omelet or Indian with veggie patties). After each service the cabins and hallways are swept and mopped. They brought bottles of drinking water and a bookseller came on board with book choices in several languages in case one had forgotten reading material.

Our first day in Calcutta was recovery day for my companion who had been sick (not from train food) and an organizing day for me to be sure everything was in place for the Bangladesh



trip. I took a short walk in the afternoon and our neighborhood was a mix of street food and high-end clothing shops (with a few related street dogs thrown in!)



I also saw the provision of donor-sponsored drinking water on the street which we had been seeing throughout the south.

A smallish but upper end mall, Forum Courtyard, was located nearby and I wandered through some now-familiar Indian brand stores before heading back. Fortunately, an excellent “Pure Veg” restaurant (meaning no eggs) was attached to the hotel. It sufficed for dinner and was where the breakfast included in the room was served.



The following day we had scheduled a customized full day driving tour. We did a quick drive-by of many of the Colonial-era edifices. The photogenic Writers' Building well-typifies this architecture in Calcutta and is where the writers of the East India Company worked. Today it houses offices of

Calcutta and is where the writers of the East India Company worked. Today it houses offices of



the West Bengal State Government. At the nearby High Court you could glimpse the attire of lawyers, although they divested it as quickly as possible when coming outside

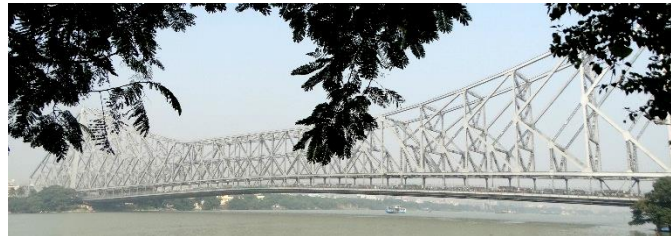


into the heat!



We focused our visit time on the ghats and flower market near the Howrah Bridge, plus a group of Jain temples.

The Howrah Bridge is noteworthy for its cantilever design built without any nuts or bolts and the number of vehicles and pedestrians that use it daily (100,000 vehicles and 2 million pedestrians).



It connects the Howrah Railroad Station (from which we would depart a few days later) back to Calcutta.

Howrah Station, opened in 1905 is the largest station in India and currently serves about two million passengers per day.



Just to the south of the bridge lie some bathing ghats, a small Hindu temple and a wrestling



venue, where wrestling occurs twice each day. It is a big sport in India. However, the big draw here, especially for a daughter of florists, is the wholesale flower market.



In addition to massive quantities of flowers and leaves, including some exotics such as lotus flowers, I was particularly impressed by the artistry of the men creating the festive garlands we had been seeing throughout the country for decorations and especially for weddings.



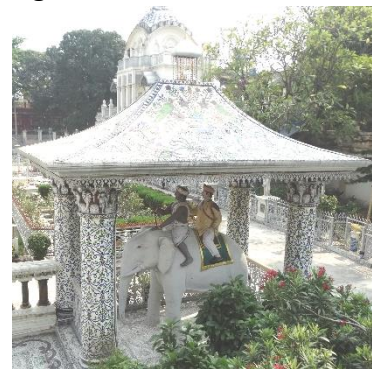
We saw brides' tiaras, decorative hangings and masses of marigolds which, along with the leaves, are brought in from the suburbs. We saw these arriving both there and later when departing from Howrah station. By and large, this is a men's profession, which I remember it



was also in Delhi, although a few women were selling leaves and limes.

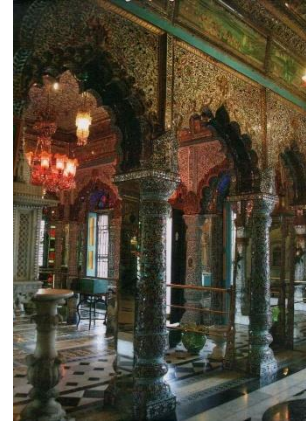
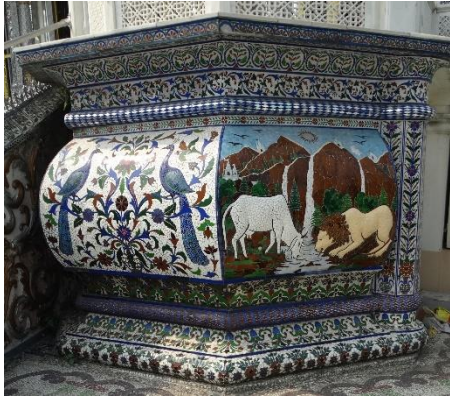


The Parshwanath Shetalnathi Jain Temple has an interesting history. The Viceroy from the north worshipped at the adjacent red Jain temple but didn't like the fact that people fished in the pond (Jains are, essentially vegan minus onions and garlic) so he bought all the adjacent land and commissioned an over-the-top (in my opinion) temple which opened in 1867. Jain temples I had previously visited had been elegant and serene. This one is a lavish, exuberant display of fine craftsmanship of --- everything!



Classical sculpture, exquisite mosaics, inlays (think Taj Mahal), chandeliers from Cuba, Bahamas, Venice and Belgium, Belgian mirrored glass, etc, etc.

Given that no photos are permitted inside I bought some postcards to share. For more interior views go to www.sitalnathtemple.com.



The third temple, built in 1895 has a lovely gateway arch and greenery.



We made the obligatory stop at Victoria Memorial, built to commemorate Queen Victoria's 1901 diamond jubilee, finally completed in 1921. We had not the time to visit either the 64-acre beautiful park or the purpose-built museum. However, viewing the advertisement for Women's Self-defense training I had been seeing about town, the balloon and other trinket sellers and the golden horse-drawn carriages for tours were well worth the stop.



Near the Birla Planetarium we were fortunate to see the parade celebrating the opening of a "tribal" exposition nearby. India has a system for

cataloguing "Adivasi" or indigenous tribal groups. Mostly they are concentrated in forest and other areas of their origins, although some ethnic minorities also fall into this category. In the 2011 census 8.6% of India's population carried this designation, which is 104 million people which would make them collectively the world's thirteenth largest country after the Philippines and before Egypt!



Calcutta is known for its fleet of Ambassador taxis (produced in India from 1957 to 2014) and rickshaws that are still hand-pulled, not cycle-rickshaws. The couple of Ambassador taxi rides we took could have used some better interior and suspension maintenance/restoration! Ironically, during monsoons the high-wheeled rickshaws are the transport best able to cope with flooded streets, but picture what that means for the pullers!



In addition to rickshaws, there is still a lot of other transport that uses human power.



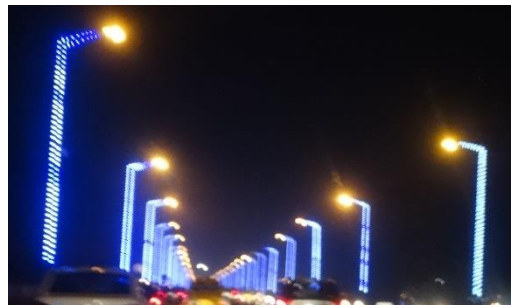
A lot of life takes place on the streets in Calcutta and there are periodic faucets provided for people to source water and bathe.



In contrast to the street life of Calcutta are the magnificent five-star hotels. We took a tea break at one, the Oberoi Grand, which is adjacent to a vibrant street market.



Although Mother Teresa was born in what is now Skopje in North Macedonia (where the only memorial to her is bronze inlays representing a corner of her family's home – see my photos from my visit there), Calcutta honors her life and work there by having the lighting on the entrance bridges in blue and white. We ran out of time to visit the Motherhouse – next trip.



On our final night we took a sunset cruise to Belur Math, starting from a pier between the Vidyasagar Setu cable-stayed bridge (barely visible in the haze) and Howrah Bridge.

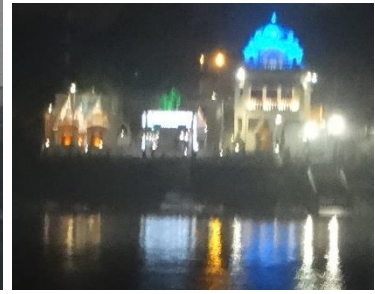
The boat itself was very nice and the trip included good quality snacks and a narration of what we were seeing. We passed the bathing ghats next to the flower market I had visited before.



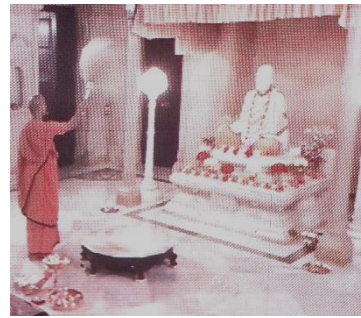
paintings of goddesses and periodic temples.



The riverfront was varied with promenades alternating with garbage dumps, with ghats (steps) of various purposes, and boat landings. There were



Belur Math is home to the Ramakrishna Mission created in memory of the 19th C Indian guru who preached unity of all religions. The large campus includes handicraft workshops, residences and study areas. The polyglot architecture of the main temple reflects the architecture of many religions. The interior ceremony was projected on a large screen.



On the return we were served a dinner of copious hors d'oeuvres . At the dock the Bank of India building was colorfully lit and the boat staff helped us find a taxi back to our hotel.



The next morning we departed at 8:20 from Howrah to Bombay. A reason to travel by train is to see the countryside and it was daylight for the first 9 hours of tis 26-hour trip. We saw the rice harvest (having witnessed planting in the south earlier in the trip).





Along the way we saw a new train track being built essentially by manual labor, men and women.



Again, the vast rivers of India, some interesting terrain and temples.



Upon waking up the next morning we were passing through the grape-growing region of Maharashtra State (which I didn't manage to capture in a photo).

Approaching Bombay you see the colorful women's clothing on the commuter train and again, the contrasts that are India – high-rises and hovels.



My final photo of the trip, at the airport, was fittingly of the elephant god Ghanesh, the god of wisdom, success and good luck which can remove obstacles and overcome difficulties.

