

INDIA SHINES THROUGH *

The TV continues to blare. India has stopped shining --a fading slogan altered to read India Can, India Will, during the recent jumbo election campaign.

Then, there's the breaking news about Maoist violence in the East. These are intermixed with advertisements about personal, corporate, and home insurance. There are Japanese watches and American-style vegetarian burgers, updates about the demolition of the Slumdog Millionaire's residence along with soon to be built luxurious, gated condominium communities, airports sealed off due to threats, and on the horizon, a momentary period of de-growth that will surely be outpaced by a consumer-led recovery that features infomercials spreading throughout the country's most distant of villages.

India enjoys a nuclear status. The US seeks a strategic tie with 1.2 billion people in the face of an increasing discussion about a devolution into something akin to more manageable city-state governments. The EU is itself engaged in creating a sole, single partnership out of what it prizes as a creative multicultural, multi-linguistic, landscape.

There was a time in the late 19th century when things seemed a bit tidier, at least to a young person known as "Ruddy," and later, after the age of thirty-five, as just plain Kipling, a journalist and a writer about everything attractive and unattractive in far off places, and an almost, but not quite forgotten, purveyor and reticent critic of the imperial burden. The author of a new biography notes that his subject's eyes looked out at a blurry world.(1) His parents, relatively new arrivals in India in 1865, realized that he was myopic at an early age though he later wrote clearly enough about Bombay, the place of his birth, and what he termed the mother of all cities--a fast growing, dense population seeking space and wealth out of transport and trade and located securely amid its plentiful palm trees, newly crafted, rectangular streets, and the sea.

By all reports he was extremely happy in an urban area where rigid divisions of caste quickly gave way to equalities based on entrepreneurial endeavors and conquests. He appeared only an onlooker to his parents' difficulties in adapting to unknown diseases and feelings of cultural isolation. He was unaware of their efforts to introduce him to both divergent surroundings and people as they fought to stay afloat financially according to his father's various jobs as a teacher of vocational art. He was only a little over five years of age when his family sailed back to the West and he was forced to abruptly abandon a dawning Anglo-Indian experience. However, it was an experience that emerged much later in fond remembrances of early caretakers in the face of the conflicts of school and professional days in what was actually a strange homeland. There were also further travels, journalistic forays into writings about greener climates, and ultimately a sturdy, stalwart literary output that belied a personality that had become so private that he was given to shredding, and then burning, even his parents' own diaries of their lives spent abroad..

Another recent reminiscence provides us with a self-confessed cinematic review. She remembers her father, a businessman with a neighborhood factory who is often away for

long periods of time, inexplicably in Japan, and his return, upon which he often greets her with a chocolate candy bar that equally as often melts in the torpid heat on the dashboard of their car. (2) This world is one of few exchanges and persistent, overly fine dividing lines. There are her father's absences, his compelling pursuit of individual achievement, his disdain for the impoverished around them, his warnings not to touch the hand of the little boy to whom she wishes to give a coin, for fear of contagion.

There are her mother's duties as a teacher, she supplements the family income, and her constant reminders that some of the children are not like her at all, for they eat rats, and these are hidden away from sight in their families' bathrooms. There is the pull and tug of what she early identifies as the poverty problem, the blind men in the neighborhood with milky eyes, the emaciated cows wandering through the streets, and her observer status as a Zoroastrian who attends a Catholic school, is exposed to the English language at home and in class, and learns Hindi only through an encounter with ancient epics at a local public library during those welcome times when readers are not interrupted by episodic power outages..

A way out appears with a chance meeting of a person her age who has spent time in America. She begins to smoke cigarettes and skips classes, but soon returns to a relentless habit of self-improvement, harboring always her family's insistence that nothing changes or has ever changed, and that the poor are able-bodied yet they never want to work. Her own endeavors take her first to the movies, comedic escapades under the Manhattan skyline, and eventually to an imposing bureaucratic office somewhere in an immense city beyond the narrow streets of neighborhood and factory.

Forms accurately completed, she waits in a long line. The first applicant is morose and he is rejected, inaccurate data; the second and third as well, incomplete certifications of birth and residence, and finally, her own language capabilities get her through with a stamped visa and a nod from the official at her insistence that she is definitely heading towards a small college in the State of Ohio.

The goodbyes are heartfelt but curiously minimal. The airplane lurches upward suddenly as she looks down on the Mumbai twilight with its streets colored by an orange and golden light. The passengers feel an unfamiliar chill while the air conditioning leaves behind a dull quiet and no scent at all.

"I'm twenty years old," she writes in her notebook," and "I'm tired."

(1) Allen, Charles. *Kipling Sahib: India and the Making of Rudyard Kipling*. New York, Pegasus Books (2009). (2) Umrigar, Thrity. *First Darling of the Morning. Selected Memories of an Indian Childhood*. New York, Harper Perennial (2004).

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