

Letter #4 - Namaste and Naan

Jaipur and Agra



The Amber Fort, Jaipur

Six hours in the car from Delhi, highway in progress, country in progress...construction everywhere, scaffolding, trucks, containers—and as we enter the dry, scrubby state of Rajasthan, camel carts. Men in loosely wrapped turbans and graceful women in sweeping red and orange Rajasthani skirts. Tidy, well-tended fields, hump-backed white cows, fiercely-horned black bullocks and be vies of monkeys. Men coated as if by flour cutting marble, so dusted in white it is impossible to see if they are wearing face protection. Hello from the Pink City of Jaipur, handicrafts capital of India.



Peacocks welcome us on a rooftop across from Shapura House, former Jaipur city palace of a small country raja. Awakening to the hoot of trains and coo of pigeons, we set off for Amber Fort, an immense fortress carved from pink mountain, ramparts, towers and miles of walls snaking the ridges. Rajputs were a proud, warlike people, their towns protected by walls and gates on high, defensible land. Amber is on even higher ground, overlooking the narrow rocky pass and even so, behind the huge wooden and stone portal the corridors move at every angle: designed with no straight lines to deter invaders. This was also a pleasure palace of gardens and lake, gazebos, balconies and pavilions—the largest, an open-air hall where the

ruler received his subjects and dispensed justice. I have such a scene in *The Star of India* as the people take darshan with their beloved maharaja who rules on local disputes and sets policy while my “star,” Nancy, newly arrived in India, watches in wonder from the screened women’s balcony. Amber had its own zenana where women were protected behind carved, latticed windows and heavy doors.

The jewel in Amber’s crown is the Sheesh Mahal, inlaid with mirrors and stone mosaics, a glittering little palace of columned arcades and archways, stained glass windows and delicate filigree-work. Still marveling, we retrace our way down steep stone steps past blue and tan-uniformed high school students on field trips, English-learners open to past and future. My daughter has observed that while much newer construction is already in decay, the old structures

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Sheesh Mahal, The Amber Fort, Jaipur

were built to last. Amber Fort will never fall!

My daughter buys a hanging of little elephants from a demanding girl with too-wise eyes. She then helps us across the busy road to our car, holding a sure palm to halt traffic. She is savvy and smart and I wish only for her an education and good life. But what are her prospects, a street urchin selling trinkets? I regret not buying more from her, giving her the banana she asked for. I had planned it for lunch, but still, why didn't I give it?

We return to visit the City Palace, sometimes home of the Maharani of Jaipur, sister of my character the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. There is now a school inside and red-jacketed kids are pouring out, greeting us with friendly hellos.

Then we enjoy a chic tea with my niece's witty friend, so lovely and graceful in her red and orange floral sari that I feel quite masculine and gawky. She reassures me that I did well on my earlier shawl purchases and then we head back to the hotel.

I catch up on what has become a major national story. When a rightist political boss died, Mumbai shut down for the funeral. Why? a university girl asked on Facebook. Her friend liked the post. Both were arrested and the uncle of the first girl had his business trashed. India erupted in a wave of soul searching over the undemocratic power of local politicians. This is a free speech issue that will have major impact.

On the road to Agra:

Pressing through dense traffic, we leave the city and reenter the landscape of eternal India. Thatched roofs, haystacks, cow patty mounds, marigolds and fluttery yellow acacias. Hefty water buffalo, lumbering cows, trash-nibbling goats, plump sheep, snuffling boar families, donkeys and scrawny feral dogs. Lavishly painted trucks and horse-drawn carts, bikes, tractors, three-wheeled tuk-tuks—all loaded and overloaded, all jockeying for space in the mad anarchy of the road.

We pass a canvas-covered shanty with a satellite dish. Food carts and tented cafes. Bricks baking in the sun. Saris spread out in fields to dry, or on low village walls. Monkeys. Motorcycles. Mobiles. Everyone talking and texting and drinking tea. And everywhere, city and country, garlanded wedding processions of every kind of vehicle, families joining under red tents to the sound of chants, fireworks and horns.

Saffron and magenta wrapped women work along the roadside, sweeping and breaking



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rock, tending fields, gathering brush for cooking fires, bearing bundles of everything on their heads, filling and carrying brass water vessels. Families sort wool and cotton for stuffing the floaty local quilts. Jaipur textiles are their own wonder of the world.

So is India's belief in the power of education. Schools are everywhere, students in their proud uniforms and backpacks, walking and bicycling home to the fields and villages. Suddenly our driver brakes hard as a large animal trots across the road: A grayish-white "jungle cow," part mule/part horned cow, horselike yet like no animal you've ever seen!

We stop outside a towering, multi-colored temple. Inside the courtyard a man gestures us toward the door. "You will enter and then come to reality. Please, there are no restrictions."

This is a temple to Hanuman the monkey god and Krishna, the handsome blue musician god and lover of young maidens. Following a worshipper, we ring a hanging bell as she then kneels before the various gods. Women spread a corner of their silk dupattas on the marble floor and prostrate themselves in prayer. The priest places an orange sweep of U on their foreheads. They are fortunate to have found reality.

The poet Tagore called Taj Mahal a teardrop frozen in time. Reaching Agra—and after the most serious security check of my life—we join tourists from every country paying homage to Shah Jahan's monument to his beloved Mumtaz... a perfect pearl gleaming in the soft end-of-day light. There are more students on field trips, eager eyes, bright smiles. We exchange greetings and suddenly I am surrounded by kids, shaking hands with an entire class. The teacher wants to take my picture with them and then with him and his gentle colleague. I am honored and moved and tell them to study hard.

An important scene in my book occurs here, as the maharaja Bhaiya brings Nancy to the Taj in tribute to their own love, but then things turn dark when the Muslim bazaar is torched and in retaliation a sacred cow slaughtered. The British departure was a hurried affair, rough lines drawn on a map to separate supposedly Hindu and Muslim majority regions—Partition, which led to the hellfires that have scarred India and Pakistan to this day.

During dinner at our century-old colonial-style hotel, two musicians emerge from my pages almost exactly as I had written them: the silver-haired cerebral sitarist and the intense young drummer (only in my story he is a harmonium player).

In the morning we set off for the airport in Delhi, passing more students in crisp white trousers and skirts, which touches me no end, a sign of respect and sacrifice in this dusty, water-short land. We pass a technology college with a towering temple inside the gates: a perfect symbol for the new and eternal India.

Next stop Aurangabad, with its ancient temple complexes carved from the mountains, and then tropical Kerala, called God's own country.



School students visit the Taj and happily pose with Diana

