

Globalization in India: Social Reality Bites, Hard Labour In Chennai

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Slap, bang, wallop. It's a full-force smack in the face. It's the wall of heat that hits on exiting Chennai's Central Railway Station. Turn left then left again and it's not long before the road narrows and things gets even hotter. A stone's throw from the station and it's off the train and into the sweltering world of Mint Street.

This isn't the sanitised world of AC shopping-mall India that's much talked about by the media. It's the earthy Sowcarpet area of north Chennai. This isn't the place of latest fashion trends, burger dens or cool cola hang outs. It's a world of wholesale markets, cycle rickshaws and tightly packed buildings. This is a place of congested streets, narrow lanes and wandering cattle. It's a place many Chennaiites have heard about but have never visited. The main pavementless thoroughfare, Mint Street, is a relentless offering of temples, hardware stores, eateries and clothes shops.

Just another Indian street where cows compete with vegetable stalls, where people jostle with vehicles, where men haul heavy loads for quenching the insatiable needs of the masses? Nothing could be further from the truth. Mint Street may well be a hot and bothered affair and might fray the nerves, but it's Chennai's special street. It's the world in one place.

Okay, that may be a little bit of an exaggeration. It's more apt to state that it's where different parts of India have come together to produce a uniquely Tamilian cocktail with intriguing Gujurati and Rajasthani aftertastes.

That's because there is a sizable north Indian community living here. Marwaris (an ethnic group mainly from Gujurat and Rajasthan), mostly money lenders and businessmen, settled in the area during the last century. Indeed, Sowcarpet derives its name from Sahukar, which means money lender in Hindi.

Its not just old women who you'll see walking about in colorful, traditional Rajasthani and Gujurati clothing and jewellery here. Slender women with faces fully veiled and wearing lehenga choli walk past in groups with babies perched on hips, as light-skinned 20-somethings in more conventional sarees zip past side-saddle on the back of mopeds or scooters. Out of Tamil Nadu and into the heart of what could be the most tradition-bound neighbourhoods of Jodphur or Bhuj within just a few minutes' walk of Chennai's main rail station. Even many of the store signs and name boards are in Hindi or Gujarati scripts.

Throughout the area, residences and retailers compete for space with Hindu and Jain temples, a mosque and a church. Mint Street itself derived its name from having housed the East India Company's mint.

Many people visit the area to sample the tasty bites on offer, which hail from all over India. Snack on chaat or crispy jalebis. Try out different flavours of kulfis and sample pyaz kachori. How about paani puris or a 'murukku' sandwich? Take some chotu motu bhel, raj shri paani poori, sinabhai idlies, novelty pau bhaaji, aloo sabzi, bhindi, raita, shahi panner or Kolkata paan.

But these are not the only Indian 'reality bites' around here. Being both residential and commercial, a journey through the wider Georgetown area may not be to everyone's liking. Stumble into the back streets and you'll soon tumble into an India of grinding hard work. Dozens of dirty dhabas with workers frenetically boiling, frying, stirring from dawn till dusk. Offering carbohydrate, oil-laden fuel for the labouring classes whose high calorie, fat-burning endeavours keep India on the move. It's an India that never sleeps. It's an India of straw covered streets and bullock carts, of constant deliveries and heavy loading, of sacks of produce delivered on the sun-beaten, bare-backs of the young and not so young; in fact, the downright old.

For those more used to the genteel side of life in more affluent countries, this 'land that time forgot', this throwback to the pre-industrial era, is something that they only get to know about by reading history books. But it's here and now in the 21st century. It's living India. It's 'modern' India. It's not the India of cyber parks, social media 'apps' or Twitter accounts. It's the India of unimaginable long hours, energy-sapping labour and tough, sinewy, dark-skinned men who've never had it so bad, who've never experienced life any better and most certainly never will.

It's the India populated by the 800 million plus that exist on less than two US dollars per day. It's the kind of thing that the great project of 'globalisation' sucks dry: the cheap buck sweated out of malnourished labour, the years squeezed dry from the reduced life expectancy afforded by manual work, the legacy of stunted growth passed on to the offspring of the labouring classes. Little surprise that a new study of more than one lakh children (100,000) across six Indian states found that as many as 42 per cent of under-fives were severely or moderately underweight and that 59 per cent of them suffered from moderate to severe stunting. The findings in the Hunger and Malnutrition (HUNGaMA) report by the Naandi Foundation have been described by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as a "national shame."

And as one hundred diesel powered generators along Mint Street and beyond power up to spew out their pollutants for the duration of the latest power cut (euphemistically called 'load shedding' here), little surprise also that one-third of India's households do not even have electricity to power a light bulb, according to the 2011 census.

For many who visit this area of Chennai, the place is just too crowded and congested. But they visit this area of the city for dried fruits, spices and grains. They come for textiles and sarees. They come for gleaming metallic kitchenware, plastic products, fashion jewellery, machine tools, electronic items, stationary and various general products at low cost.

The area is not really a place to hang out. It's a fast and furious world of hard work, cow mess, mud, indigestion and sensory overload. It's definitely not for the weak hearted.

Perhaps that's why many from more affluent parts of the city never come. They prefer to

visit the AC worlds of Express Mall, City Centre Mall or Spencer Plaza. For many people, not just in India but throughout the world, perhaps some things are better out of sight, out of mind. In Sowcarpet, things are hot, maybe a little too hot, maybe a little too real.

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