

A Rock and a Hard Place in India

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Prior to the COVID-related restrictions and lockdowns, I had spent a substantial part of every year in India since 1995 (25 consecutive years). Much has happened in that time and I have been observing, analysing and commentating extensively on developments there, especially the devastating agrarian crisis.

While veteran rural affairs reporter P Sainath has described rural India as arguably the most fascinating place on the planet, urban India should not be overlooked. An urban landscape that continues to feed off the lifeblood of the rural. But it too has more than its fair share of beauty, happiness, misery and contradictions.

A full-force smack in the face. It’s the wall of heat that hits on exiting Chennai Central Station. Turn left then left again and it is not long before the road narrows and things get 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 celebrated 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. The main pavement-less thoroughfare, Mint Street, is a relentless offering of temples, hardware stores, eateries and shops.

It’s a hard rock affair on Mint Street, where concrete turns to rubble and burst drains turn rubble to mud. It’s a heavy metal kitchenware delight, where at the start of the street a hundred shops and stores offer gleaming pots, pans, stoves, bowls and shiny steel utensils. A thousand meals yet to be prepared throughout the kitchens of Chennai with equipment bought on this street. A million bellies yet to be filled with idli, dosa and sambar, the holy trinity of Tamil culinary delight.

Guarded by temple priests and touched by believers, an eternal flame rages in front of Shiva’s metal trident outside a Hindu temple. It’s dusk and Mawari moneylenders’ daughters

blaze into the night and possibly into your heart. Beauty exists not only inside a Hindu temple but also on the backseat of a Hero Honda.

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? Not really. 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.



Source: Erik Törner, Sweden (erik@torner.nu)

Maybe it is more apt to state that it's where different parts of India have come together to produce a uniquely Tamilian cocktail with intriguing Gujarati and Rajasthani aftertastes.

The area around Mint Street is Rajasthan by the sea, Gujarat on the Coromandel Coast, where Mawaris (an ethnic group from those two states), mostly moneylenders and businessmen, migrated to during the 20th century and even before. Where the yellow veil of the desert state still covers faces, still hangs head to toe on slender figures that glide at dusk.

Down on Mint Street, you can hear the call of Gujarat and feel the heat of Rajasthan.

Appearing out of the early morning dust, slender women with faces fully veiled and wearing lehenga choli float past in groups with babies perched on hips.

Out of Tamil Nadu and into the heart of what could be the most tradition-bound neighbourhoods of Jodhpur 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.

Body swerve one way and then the other. There are one hundred accidents waiting to happen down these narrow lanes. Lanes without pavements, lanes without end, lanes without respite from activity and chaos.

Within a centimetre of your body and possibly an inch of your life, brightly painted trucks with 'Blow horn at night' painted on the rear and hand drawn pictures of frightening demons and reassuring gods growl past. Cyclists, cycle rickshaws, overloaded cycle carts packed high with boxes and men with huge, heavy sacks also rush by. They all have right of way.

Boxes containing metal pressure valves, fluorescent light tubes, surgical appliances, herbal medicines and TVs. Sacks containing flour, rice, spices and produce. Tubing made of plastic or metal. Tubing for underground cables, electrical machinery and all manner of components and parts for ships, factories and houses.

Think of anything that humanity could and does use. Then open your eyes and see, hear, feel, taste or smell it. Sacks of garlic or apples lifted on the back from trucks or cycle carts and slammed down. Shree Grinders, Lakshmi buildings, Ganesh Traders. The names of gods or symbols denoting greatness adorn the signage in this area.

An area of thousands of one-room workshops and trading offices and wholesale merchants, milling, grinding, beating, buying, selling, importing and exporting. Sheets of plastic rolled around tubes. Whole families clung around seats of mopeds.

A stray dog wanders through the jungle of legs. Its teats almost touch the floor. Another mongrel with an ear half missing munches on what must be a delectable piece of garbage.

Plastic bags containing fabrics from 'Fancy Saree Fashion House' dangle from arms. Bejewelled princesses glide through mud while talking on cell phones down the narrow alleys off Mint Street.

Neighbourhood centres, marriage halls and Jain and Hindu temples. Apartment blocks, back lane schools and small hospitals. Sowcarpet is not just an area of commerce and hard labour, it's also an area of community... many communities from different regions of India, of different faiths of different appearances, of different wealth brackets.

This is an area of migrants. Migrants who originally rented rooms from local Tamil people. Many of the locals eventually sold up and moved out completely to reside elsewhere.

In what is possibly the most overcrowded part of Chennai, the buildings sprawled sideways and upwards to accommodate migrants from North India, many of whom had larger families than the original Tamil inhabitants of the area. The fact that their neighbours from towns and villages up in Gujarat, Rajasthan and elsewhere often followed has not helped.

Sowcarpet loosely translates as moneylender or pawnbroker. Moneylenders (or pawnbrokers) do not tend to remain poor. Neither do wholesale traders or the many jewellers who set up shop here. The quality of some of the apartment blocks, the facades at least, indicate a certain degree of wealth remains in the area. The well-off continue to reside in these types of areas throughout India because they rely on the local community, its 'social capital' and the associated networks, to do business and keep ahead of the game.

Back in the 1700s, Telegu speaking people migrated to Mint Street. People from Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states eventually came too. This eclectic mix has helped make Sowcarpet what it is today, not least in terms of heart, soul and vibrancy.

Gold jewellery shimmers in brightly lit shop windows and drips on the skin of women who sit

in groups on shop floors, where men wheel out cloth from endless rolls for customers' inspection. Rolls of material destined to be draped around bodies then hung over a thousand Sowcarpet balconies above the streets while drying in the sun.

Men stand sipping at stalls, viewing the world from over the rim of a plastic cup of scalding chai or coffee. A poor cycle rickshaw man transports a young woman of north Indian ancestry with mobile phone pressed against her veil-secluded head.

Dogs take a break between naps in search of a spare bit of rice. Cows munch on vegetation strewn across the street. People stop at stalls of apples, mangoes, aubergines and oranges, all meticulously laid out for public perusal. It's abundance overload on Mint Street.

Perfumes, paper, plates, plastic tubing and intricate henna hand painting done on the street. 'Shree Ganesh Steel', 'Bharat Steel House' and 'Gents Beauty Parlour'. The mundane practicalities of everyday living next to alluring adornments designed to beautify and attract.

An innings already played out, an old man sits and waits on the step of a six storey apartment block to die another day. A hundred different architectural styles, each narrow building separately designed yet attached to one another. Functional concrete boxes stripped of any beauty or appeal stand next to shiny marbled buildings in which each metal railed balcony, window ledge and carefully designed recess were thought out down to the finest detail.

The claustrophobic lanes hemmed in by a never ending wall of four to seven storey buildings winding their way into the distance. Ugliness and beauty, paradox and jumble.

Mint Street itself derived its name from having housed the East India Company's mint. These days, 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 idlis, 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 (the city's original port district) means stumbling into the back streets and tumbling 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 endeavours keep India on the move.

An India that never sleeps. 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.

This is here and now in the 21st century. 'Modern' India. Not the India of cyber parks, social media 'apps' or Twitter accounts. The India of unimaginable long hours, energy-sapping labour and tough, sinewy men who have never had it so bad, who have never experienced life any better and most certainly never will.

And on the corner, by the cracked concrete entrances to the subway that run beneath another main thoroughfare to get to the busy Rajiv Gandhi government hospital, a bunch of cycle carts parked up.

And a series of street stalls beckon. Frying, cooking, heating in the roasting climate. A quick bite of dosa held in hand, a mouthful of rice shovelled with fingers. Street food served on the street, fast food eaten fast.

The India of roadside stoves, pots and pans. It's the neighbourhood India of the common man, for the common man. It's community.

The promised land?

The type of small-scale enterprise that many a politician would readily wrench from neighbourhoods in return for a pocket full of Walmart gold. India's education system, healthcare system, infrastructure and welfare system have already been sacrificed for many a burgeoning Swiss bank account.

It is called accumulation by dispossession. It is called stolen wealth. And the process has accelerated since the 'opening up' of the economy in the 1990s, which seems to be coming to a head in 2021 with new farm laws (repealed but no doubt still on the table) and e-commerce FDI that could sound the death knell for tens of millions of small, independent farmers and traders.

A cheap con-trick sold to the masses on the road to some bogus notion of the 'promised land', some idiotic secular theology of neo-liberal fast track 'development'.

A promised land of fortune, mansions and lavish living that the tricksters attained years ago - by cartels, force and duplicity, more recently masquerading as 'neo-liberalism', masquerading as the 'free' market. A global market rigged, bought and paid for courtesy of the Rothschilds, Rockefellers, Cargill billionaires and various other mega-rich fraudsters.

This trend is not unique to India. It's global. Like some of the genetically engineered crops in the fields or the protruding bellies of the malnourished, it's not genuine economic growth that has been reported on until quite recently but abnormal swelling.

Shopping and consumerism have become the concerns and priorities of India's misinformed and misled creamy layer. Misinformed by news outlets that pass off infotainment as news. Misinformed by successive governments that cosy up to western multi-nationals with secretive 'memorandums of understanding' and then proceed to target some of the poorest people in the country who resist as 'the enemy within'.

A few streets away, deafening firecrackers explode, set off by a gathering of men at the head of a funeral procession. Stray dogs flinch, onlookers cower, store shutters hastily pulled down. The raucous entourage makes its way along the street.

Cheap alcohol swilled from small glass bottles. Hardship etched in the men's faces while they dance and accompany the vehicle carrying a flower-adorned body to commemorate a life lived, a passing over. A celebration of living and dying in a country drenched in religion, obsessed with ritual and defined by rigid social hierarchy.

The booze-fuelled dancing of the men is imbued with a certain desperation. The poor always celebrate with a harder edge. They act as if they control the street, as if they rule the world for the day. They don't. And they never will.

Young children cling to their mothers' shoulders, perched side saddle on saree-covered hips.

The choking stench of animal waste and urine. Cows munch on the stinking garbage overflowing from the large plastic bins.

This is also 'modern' India. Not the one often celebrated by the media, an India of steel and glass cyber parks, Mumbai skyscrapers and the affluent who also act as if they control the world. But they actually do. And their type possibly always will.

Their India is inhabited by a minority. A privileged minority, whose reservation quota is never questioned, is barely acknowledged. By accident of birth, whether through class or caste, or a combination of both, its members were always in prime position to take advantage of the privileges afforded by background in the brave new world of economic banditry.

That's the lie of meritocracy for you in a heavily stratified society skewed either in your favour or against you long before you ever leave the womb. A hard lesson that those dusty, crying kids who cling to their mothers will soon learn. Their tears come fast and furious in the heat and will probably do so throughout life. It's a tough lesson that the hardened men at the front of the funeral procession learned long ago.

Two sections of India that are worlds apart but inhabit the same land mass, with one living off the cheap labour of the other.

From the building sites to the farms, the scrawny bodies of the disadvantaged and exploited provide the sweated labour for today's affluent India that wallows in high rise AC penthouses, obesity and other 'rich man's' nutrition-related diseases - living off the fat of the land.

After the procession had made its way through the area, the dogs and cows once again meander freely and women begin where they had left off by shopping for vegetables. And you can bet your bottom rupee that it is prices and costs that dominate their thinking. Making ends meet is what counts around here.

Other concerns prevail about ten minutes' walk away in the latest shopping mall to have sprung up, where the price of designer jeans or sportswear are the burning priority. Less than a kilometre from the stifling, vegetation-strewn locality, the international brands have arrived, adorning the large glass frontages of the latest temple of consumerism. This is not a world of lunghis, steaming chai and steaming filth or of undernourished parents with their hungry kids.

This is the world of Lacoste, Nike and Baristo, where a cup of coffee can cost the best part of a daily wage for most in this country. A world of air-conditioned acquisitive materialism, conspicuous consumption and four-wheel drive vehicles.

It is the modern India lying next door to the other modern India whose inhabitants will never visit or step foot inside, unless to collect plastic bottles in a sack carried on back or to wipe clean the hallowed floors dirtied by the designer boots of the privileged.

Poor women worked each day till they dropped in order to help build this mall and hundreds like it. Their babies played in the dirt nearby. They built it for millionaire real estate speculators and investors and well-nourished women whose servants will mind their kids as they adhere to the 'shop till you drop' dogma of modern advertising.

Back on Mint Street, another day begins. Women with hand-held brushes bend over and sweep dirt into the air. Back-street dairy owners release cows into the streets. And people wait. The destitute wait for alms outside the many temples. Men squat and wait for a frenzied day of shifting and loading to begin.

Others wait too: artisans whose tools – trowels, hammers, chisels and various other implements – are displayed on the ground in front of them. Skills for hire. The dignity of labour.

Bells chime and semi-naked, soft-bodied temple priests brush past proud-looking men honed from granite. They have already started their day's toil of lifting and carrying bricks. A tough day ahead.

Approaching a one room shop with counter facing directly onto the street, I need to replenish –

“Vanakam. Thums Up? Glass bottle,” I say. (*Thums Up is a soft, fizzy drink.*)

Vanakam (greeting) being one word of Tamil that I know. At one point, my Tamilian vocabulary was up to about 40 words!

Moving back towards the fridge in the dark recesses of his dimly lit shop, the vendor obliges with faint smile.

A flash of blue and yellow breezes out from a dark alleyway a few metres down. A resident of one of the many apartments that make up the compact four-storey block to which this ‘mom and pop’ shop belongs.

The blue and yellow figure stops at the shop and, in Tamil, orders some washing powder. She must be no more than 26. Her huge, dark, watery cow eyes glisten. The only part of her body exposed is her pale skinned face and a slightly hairy braceleted arm protruding from her tightly wrapped around saree.

A woman under wraps. A housewife. A mother. A washer of clothes, a doer of household chores. She leaves with packet in hand. She glides and jingle jangles thanks to her bangles and ankle bracelet. Breezing back into an alleyway of untold secrets, mystery and seclusion, she will faithfully clean whiter than white for the rest of her life because her type do. Her type have to.

Nearby, a garish billboard advertising the latest blockbuster. The moustachioed handsome hero of the Tamil movie variety towers tall above the traffic. The hero, who dishes out and is sometimes the recipient of a form of slapstick violence that never really bruises, never really cuts and never really hurts. In make-believe movie-land, the pain is always dulled.

And around another corner, another story. Boys in pristine, white uniforms play. A fee-paying Christian ‘Don Bosco’ school for parents with money. A whitewashed school building and spacious yard. Neatness abounds.

Directly opposite, outside on the street, a jumbled mess of one room hutments. Corrugated metal and hardboard partitions thrown together for walls. Plastic sheeting for roofs tied with rope onto railings. Dusty kids with matted hair. Cow shit and flies. Dog piss and stench. And black sludge dredged up from underground sewers by bare-chested municipal workers with

their rods.

Young, hutment-dwelling women yell at their squealing kids. Coarse, hoarse voices. Earthy women with the grit of the land, the soil of the village engrained in their pores. Sitting outside their dwellings packed with bedding, checking friends' hair for lice, watching the pots and pans boil. Daily rituals. Checking and yelling. Cooking and washing. And threading flowers for sale to adorn hair or garland Hindu effigies.

A hundred plastic pots of water secured from street stanchions for washing clothes and cooking. Open stoves at the roadside lit with wood. Boiling and stirring. Metal pots and pans. Rice, sambar, veg.

A small, grubby local chai shop across the way looks out onto giant but fading hand-painted wall pictures of Hindu gods, whose faces watch over the neighbourhood. Murals with metaphors.

And not too far away, the imperious domes of Victorian-era Madras High Court cast long shadows over the neighbourhood.

Daylight fades. A mother and her two kids already fast asleep, lying on the solid wooden planks of a bicycle cart surrounded by rubble.

Between a rock and a hard place in India.

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