

A Fly in the Ointment, Cautions Thrown to the Wind,  
A Momentary Lapse of Reason,  
There's a Sucker Born Every Minute , etcetera

October, 1971

In defense of Kuka, how could he have resisted. He had spotted my Swiss Army knife on the table and I had noticed his eyes opening wide. So I showed him all the innards: mine was one with a saw blade and scissors in addition to the usual stuff. I let him examine it, and then a week later it was gone. Kuka was my neighbor's second eldest son, about 12 years old. I became really close with the family. Their home was only about 30 yards away from my quarters. That's because my quarters had been their house before the fish farm was established and they had then built alongside. My cook Habbu was incensed that my knife was stolen and was determined to find out who did it. That didn't take long because Kuka had shown it around, and I got it back.



But not for long. A few weeks later the knife disappeared again, this time forever. I didn't care. Somebody out there had a wonderful thing.

Wonderful only because no one here had ever seen such a knife. I hoped it wouldn't cause its new owner trouble. And I owned two much more valuable and practical knives that my Dad had given me, a nice old stockman and an equally good scout. However, it was time to put a lock on my door, and I did.

At the Kathmandu Airport , 11/21/1972

The scene is me getting out of a taxi with all my stuff: backpack full of my sleeping bag and bulky sheepskin coat and duffle-bag containing two Tibetan thankas that I had bought, three Gurkha Kukri machetes for Man Singh, Bhadam Singh and Subdal, and heavy wool sweaters for Habbu and Mr. Shrivastava. I had returned from my trek to Kala Pattar a few days earlier and since then basically I just shopped and ate good food. I reached into my kurta pocket for my wallet to pay the driver — no wallet! A kurta pocket is deep and hangs loose. Nothing can fall out. I was so surprised it had been picked and I couldn't imagine where and when. I had a few Nepali rupees still in my money-belt, so I paid the driver. It occurred to me in a flash that maybe somehow he had picked my wallet. My passport and vaccination certificate were safe, as usual, in the leather pouch slung around my neck inside my kurta. That's always the most important thing, but I hated to lose the wallet, a red leather one I had made from a Tandy kit years ago. Safe in a front pants pocket was.....a quarter-inch thick, 2 1/2-inch diameter disc of very black hashish (HEY, it was the 70s). Well, I,...I SAY, I,... never used much of it because back at the fish farm I became a hero of sorts. After the Gujar milkmen found out about what the sahib had, they stopped by daily, on their way home from selling milk in Shivpuri, whether they really needed water from our well or not (locally, only the weak ganja from the government store was available). Baba, Subdal, and Bhadam Singh were very happy with the Sahib, too. This went on for a couple of weeks. It all got out of hand, a mistake I concluded, but not a very big one.

At Bhagora Fish Farm, July 1973

I had moved my bed way out by the river from which we were now pumping water to the ponds, courtesy of the electric pump I had recently installed. We had placed pairs of pituitary-injected rohus in cloth mesh happas that were situated in the new concrete in-ground tank. The Plan was to wake up around midnight and check if breeding had occurred and , if so, remove the brood-fish from the happas while the eggs would not be sensitive to the disturbance. Baba, our farm watchman, was also sleeping along side to assist me. Well, there were no eggs, and I planned a third injection in the morning, so I turned off my radio that was under my bed. When I arose in the morning the radio was gone.

I had bought that radio in May of '72 during a trip to Agra. I had been with Mr. Shrivastava at Gwalior for a Fisheries Dept. meeting and we just had to go on and see the Taj Mahal, the Fort, and the Moti Masjid. We also toured the nearby Kaserat Bazar, where I bought a pair of tablas and the radio, a Philips transistor made in India, about the size of a collegiate dictionary, for 260 rupees, about half of my monthly living allowance. It had short wave and medium wave bands, but the short wave carried just about every thing in India and I could easily listen to All India Radio, BBC-Asia, Radio Ceylon, and Radio Multan (Pakistan). With a mesh antenna on the roof I could also pick up Australia, Peking, Moscow, and Ethiopia. For a while I listened to nightly readings from *Pride and Prejudice* on the BBC. Radio Ceylon was a funny mix of western pop, soul, and country music. The first time I heard Carly Simon's "You're So Vain" was on Radio Ceylon. I was astonished how one morning a fire and brimstone church service was broadcast, complete with "yah, that's right" responses to the preacher's exhortations. But I mostly enjoyed All India Radio which mainly broadcasted India classical music, typically sitar, tabla, shinaee, and basaree compositions. When Habbu and Baba joined me in the evenings

I would tune in All-India Radio if I wasn't already listening to it. Sometimes I would play my tabla along with the sitar music and then Baba would start with his vocal tabla imitation, and the next thing you know the radio would be off, Baba would be singing and maybe I would be playing my soprano recorder (and I think we sounded pretty bad). Habbu liked listening to Radio Moultan's classical singing — it was so very spiritual.

After the theft of the radio, we had to rely on our own music making. And around this time I had bought from Babal Lal his snake-charmer's bean (he would make another), which helped compensate for the loss of the radio. Because the farm was now electrified with an outdoor light on the new chokidar building near where my bed was that night, I concluded the light may have assisted the thief, whoever that was.

At the Udaipur Airport, Rajasthan, 9/14/1973

“YEH, tō , Hindustan hai !!” (THIS, then, is India !!) I drilled into the India Airlines official. What had begun with my asking how I could get my ticket replaced or fare refunded quickly escalated into a battle of wills. I then noticed him looking past me and I turned to see everyone else in the terminal frozen in place and staring at us, eager to see the outcome.

I had been working with printers for the last 6 days, proofreading our new *Manual of Fish Culture in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh*, a joint effort of our group of PCVs and the principal of the fisheries training school in Udaipur. I had with me the first few copies to deliver to the Delhi office. Udaipur, the City of Sunrise, is a lake-side city of island pleasure palaces, white-washed houses and lush gardens with fountains. The ruling family of this region, Mewar, was founded in AD 144, and the Maharaja of Udaipur was always the highest in rank of the Rajput Princes.





What should have been my last evening there included the reward of dining with the printer's family, a lasting memory. The fare was a local speciality, *daal bati* (spiced soupy yellow lentils with dough balls). The kitchen and dining room was an attached shed with a cooking fire on the dirt floor. When I arrived the daal was already simmering over a bed of hardwood

coals. The dough balls, about the size golf balls, were being prepared for baking by being individually coated with a thick layer of dried cow dung turned into a paste. These were then buried into the coals and thus baked until the dung was pure black ash, which was brushed off, revealing perfectly baked balls for crumbling into the bowls of daal. Eaten with fingers, it was very good, and my smiling approval pleased my host's family enormously.

The next morning I took a tonga to the Indian Airlines Office, bought a ticket to Delhi and was told a shuttle bus would be leaving in about 45 minutes for the airport, 6 kilometers to the east of the city. Within a few minutes a few taxi drivers converged on the few passengers waiting for the bus, trying to entice us to forego the bus for a mere few rupees more. I agreed along with a several others. I was alone in my taxi and after about a kilometer we reached backed-up traffic at the Suraj Pol (the Sun Gate). The whole area was flooded and I could see some people walking through, the water being knee-deep in the gate itself. The Udaipur of old was a walled city surrounded by a moat and accessed by 5 main gates. The driver explained that a distant downpour had apparently flooded this part of the ancient moat and that the taxi could not proceed though such a depth. So we sat there waiting for the water level to recede. I could readily see that was not happening. After about 15 minutes the shuttle bus appeared and drove right through the flooded gate and on to the airport. In another few minutes a large Indian Army troop transport truck was about to do the same. Standing on the truck bed were several army personnel, among whom the taxi driver said, was the Governor of Rajasthan. I immediately hurried from the taxi and implored the men in the truck to take me onboard. They ignored me. Grabbing my luggage, I left the taxi and then waded through the gate. Shorty, I encountered a private car that was returning from the airport. I explained my situation to

a very nice and sympathetic couple who agreed to turn around and deliver me to the airport, still about 5 kilometers away. When we arrived at a portion of the road parallel to the runway we could see the plane starting to taxi in preparation for takeoff. At this point I did the most ridiculous thing: with suitcase in one hand I began running down the road opposite the plane, waving my arms! Needless to say, that was ineffective. I thanked the couple heartily and then walked into the terminal. There I met two other people who shared my fate, a young American woman and an Indian business man. They had found out from “that man over there” that our tickets were now invalid and that we would have to purchase new ones for the next day’s flight. So I went right over to him, a small Sikh having a compact stylish turban, to verify these facts.

Our conversation was a brief one, with me interrogating him in Hindi and he answering me in English. He divulged the Indian Airlines policy for no-show ticket holders and said it was my fault for not taking the shuttle bus. I countered with the fact that no such policy existed with Air-India or any other international carrier I knew of. India Airlines is a domestic carrier for the most part, he explained, with a different policy and I must have understood all this. I became hot at this and exclaimed, “*Hum tō kuch be n’hee samajleeah!*” (we absolutely understood nothing!) When I determined he would not yield, I let loose the salvo, “*YEH, tō, Hindustan hai,*” (THIS, then, is India), and with the two of us now recognizing that we had an attentive audience, he yielded by providing me with a form that I could present to the airline’s office in New Delhi for getting a refund, minus a percentage.

There was just enough time to catch the shuttle bus back to the airline office and so I joined the other screwed passengers and those that had departed the plane. We bought new air fares, and from the office I shared a tonga with the Indian business man, Mr. Roy, and Patty, who I learned was visiting India in connection with her masters degree in Asian Studies.



During the ride we became better acquainted, but then we were dropped off at different hotels, my new friends at an expensive one and me at the same cheap one I had been staying at.

The next morning we caught the shuttle bus to the airport and had an uneventful flight to New Delhi. On arrival, Patty suggested that I accompany her to a friend's home where she was staying. She wanted to find out all about my work and impressions of the country and its people. I agreed, and what followed was a lengthy interview, lubricated with Johnnie Walker Red, and I drank more than enough. Eventually I shifted the conversation to what I had been thinking about — the whole shuttle-bus saga. I had concluded that we had been the most recent subjects of a well-practiced swindle that is triggered by flooding at the Suraj Pol Gate, a not uncommon occurrence during the monsoon season. The airline officials were able to purge the records of our original ticket purchase and then pocket the cash with some percentage then paid to their accomplices the taxi-drivers. I told Patty that I had never before used that impromptu and disparaging remark that had defeated the airline official, the clincher of a performance for which she complemented me, and that the superb hospitality I received from the Goyal Brothers Printers was a truer representation of the India I had come to love.

Patty invited me to stay over, but I had to decline because I was expected at the Peace Corps office and was already a day late. By the time I reached the office the director had left and I decided to spend the night there. The next day I spent several hours talking with the director, Dev Chopra. He laughed about the shuttle-bus saga, and now I was laughing too. He then told me where the Indian Airlines Office was located. I went there and actually got a refund of 220 rupees (the fare had been 250 rupees and was part of the expense allowance for



producing the fish culture manual). Three days later, following a medical checkup and bureaucratic formalities, I was mustered out of Peace Corps Service and free to use part of my “adjustment allowance” to travel all over India until mid-December.

In Bombay, 11/13/1973

Until now, my trip to the South had been so interesting, enjoyable, and smooth. From Madurai I took a bus through the hills to the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala where a pleasant boat ride offered views of wild elephants and gaur (Indian buffalo, the largest of all bovines). Then, another bus trip through mountains and tea plantations took me to Kottayhaman, where I boarded a boat for a 16 mile cruise through the picturesque canals to Allepy. From there it was a short bus ride to Cochin where I visited the old Portuguese forts and saw the cantilevered fishing lift-nets. I spent a week in that wonderful city, dined well in the south Indian thali fashion and did some shopping. A long bus ride along the coast took me to Goa, that seaside place that had enchanted our volunteer group 2 years before. My first stop was to look up a relative of Major Angre, Pratapsingh Rane, whose home resembled a small fortress, with narrow windows which resembled breaches as cover for firing weapons. Mr. Rane confirmed that had indeed been the case as his Maratha ancestors had fought the colonial Portuguese centuries ago.



One room displayed flintlock guns, spears, daggers and swords that the chieftain Ranes used in an estimated 14 rebellions against their colonial rulers. Then during the next 6 days I explored some of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese churches, including the magnificent Se Cathedral and the Basilica of Bom Jesus where the body of St. Xavier is entombed, or, rather, what's left of it after parts have been distributed here and there as sacred relics. It's on public display every 10 years, and a 16<sup>th</sup> century devotee is reputed to have bitten off a toe and carried it in her mouth to Lisbon. But most of my time was spent down on Baga Beach, and who could blame me.



After 5 days in Goa I took a wild all-night bus ride through the hills of the Western Ghats to Bombay. Sitting right behind the driver, I had a clear view as he, with scant brake use, cranked the steering wheel through hairpin curves bordering precipitous drop-offs.

And so now in Bombay I was running a little low on funds and my first chore was to cash some of my American Express travelers checks. In September I had converted \$1100 cash into those. That sum was most of my Peace Corps Volunteer "adjustment allowance," originally conceived to cover air fare back to the U.S. plus an equal amount so one wouldn't arrive broke. Alternatively, many volunteers, like me, used it for travel, since we were on the other side of the world and our chances of returning here uncertain. While I was having lunch at a street-side cafe table, a tall, blond, Australian hippie struck up a conversation. Eventually, he confided how he avoided the official undervalued rate when he exchanged his dollars for rupees. The official rate was Rs.7.65 /dollar, whereas the black market rate was Rs.10/dollar. Well, I had travelers checks, but he said that was no problem, and explained that a bank employee he had met could facilitate an exchange.

Two years before, my first day in Bombay had been a trip to a hospital clinic to get treated for dysentery (refer to my story "Ecology"). Now, on my first day, I found myself in a taxi with a "bank employee" on a short ride to a bank to make a black market currency exchange. (Reader, I know what you are thinking, I'm an idiot. You are correct. But remember, my trip had been going so well). Upon arriving, the bank employee asked to examine my checks and so I handed the booklet, none of which were countersigned by me, to him in the front seat next to the driver. He said they looked "authentic" but he needed his contact to see them before I signed any over and received payment. Before I could object he hurriedly left the taxi, entered the bank, and that was the last I ever saw of him. Sitting in the taxi for about 10 minutes and waiting for his return, the driver was absolutely mum and avoided all eye contact. I walked back to my lodging, contemplating my predicament and, of course, my stupidity.

The next morning I was having breakfast at the same cafe when, lo and behold who should show up but my Australian hippie friend and his girlfriend, who was from Buffalo and had wanted to meet me. He asked me if the transaction went as expected. I noticed that he didn't seem too surprised about the outcome and he even had a solution to my predicament. That was to report the checks lost at the local police station and then have a statement to that effect notarized at the American Consulate. He even told me exactly where those two places were, and explained that getting my checks replaced would have to be accomplished at the American Express Office in New Delhi. And he cautioned me against saying that the checks were stolen.

That afternoon I did go to the police station but at first I reported the checks stolen. The officer calmly informed me that to assert that such a theft had happened was "a very serious charge," and that maintaining it would entail an abundance of complications. "Mister Vatsin, you are losing the checks. These things happen," he said, and he filled out and gave me a form to that effect.

The next morning I went to the American Consulate and found a Notary Public in its midst. Before notarizing my statement the notary mentioned that there had been a number of lost checks reported within the year and asked if I was sure mine hadn't been stolen. Well, I didn't *think* that was the case. That was my lie. It was a bad moment, and I had a feeling he knew I was another dumb victim of a familiar scheme. Much to my chagrin, besides examining my passport he copied down my home address and months later I found out my parents had received a call from the Consulate to verify my identity and whereabouts.



At noontime I returned to eat at the cafe and, surprise surprise, my Australian friend turned up, sat directly across from me, and after a bit asked if I had followed his directions. I said I had, but I also mentioned what the Consulate official told me and that I thought the police were part of scheme, and the taxi driver, and.....I just looked him in the eye. He returned my stare and said that it's known that opium addicts become involved in these kinds of schemes "Don't you know one of the signs? You can see it in their eyes."



Outside my Bombay lodgings, NOT the opium addicts

Well.....I still had a reserve of Rs.500 in my money belt, and so I calculated I had enough to enjoy a side excursion to Aurangabad, pay for my lodging, buy train fare to Delhi, and have about Rs. 200 surplus before claiming my "lost check" replacement, assuming that actually would occur (luckily, it would) ..... and new misadventures would be avoided.

The excursion was a two-day bus trip 240 miles to Aurangabad, Daulatabad, and the Ellora and Ajanta caves and included overnight lodging.



The 22 Ajanta Caves were carved out of flood basalt by Buddhist monks to serve as monasteries and worship halls (2nd century BC to 8th century A.D).. They are without question one of the most remarkable sights in India and are universally regarded as masterpieces of Buddhist religious art.

The Flying Apsara  
Cave 17 fresco  
300-500 A.D.





Ellora  
Kailasanatha Hindu temple  
8th century  
50-m long  
carved out of  
solid rock from  
the top down



at Daulatabad  
the Chand Minar  
Pillar of Victory  
Bahmani Sultanate  
14th century  
built at the base of the  
fortress to commemorate  
its capture.  
The 13th century fortress  
was built on a huge isolated  
rock of granite 800 feet  
high with a perpendicular  
scarp of  
80 to 120 feet all around.

