

The Spirit of the Place: India before the British*

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I think back now to that Muskogee leader and his inspirited ballsticks. Whatever the difficulties we might have in understanding the language of Francis Bacon, I think we have no trouble with the fundamental concepts of Bacon's philosophy. Our real problem -- I speak of Westerners now -- lies in understanding the non-Western world and the landscapes created by non-Western peoples. I've already pointed to the special quality of those places: once as I stood tiptoe between the amphitheaters of Luk Keng, again as I strolled to the edge of Hengdi and felt those rays from Beijing, a third time in describing the power of the Ming Tombs. Yet it is by no means easy to say precisely what it is that I'm talking about.

I do know that I first felt it in 1981 at a place called Ramappa, or sometimes Palampet, from a nearby village of that name. This was in southern India, at the eastern edge of the Telangana Plateau. I was with a group of irrigation engineers, and we were not more than a few miles south of the Godavary River, beyond which begins the rough and still wild mountains in which Kipling a century ago set his Mowgli stories. The engineers took me to a medieval reservoir called Ramappa Tank. (That use of the word tank, which at first sounds so odd to Americans, is straightforward, for the word is of Indian origin and simply means reservoir.) We toured the 5,000 acres of paddy it irrigates. The engineers took me also without warning to a temple, very nearly in ruins, that lay near the dam. Its stone floor, as well as its roof-supporting columns, were broken by earth subsidence, and the whole structure seemed supported mostly by concrete blocks, which had been mortared into crude pillars sometime in the 1920s.

Perhaps it was the shiny basaltic Nandi that first caught my eye, it seemed almost alive, this bull waiting patiently outside the temple for its rider, Lord Shiva, to step outside. Perhaps it was the carefully carved friezes, with I suppose hundreds of tail-in-trunk elephants marching right to left. I can't be more specific; all I know is that I knew I wanted to come back to this place, alone.

It took me a decade to get back. Finally, in 1991, I managed to fly to Hyderabad, rent a car, and drive out the hundred or so arid, rocky, and sporadically paddy-brightened miles to Warangal, the nearest town. The next day I drove 30 miles farther, toward the wild Godavary. Before getting to the river, I turned off the lonely highway at a junction that was being used for a weekly market. I happened to come on the right day, and hundreds of pedestrians, who had already walked miles to get here, were now milling past piles of foodstuffs and flamboyantly bright cosmetic powders. There were long lines of tethered bullocks, their horns painted bright blue; there were

desperately bleating kids being dragged off from mothers they seemed to know they would never see again.

A one-lane road branched off to the left. I took it and passed along the base of a long, flat-topped ridge, forested in young teak. Part of the ridge had been breached by natural forces, and it was in this breach that the long-vanished Kakatiya kings had built Ramappa.

When the dynasty fell the dam had failed or been destroyed, and Ramappa remained empty until it was restored early in the twentieth century by a British engineer working for the nizam of Hyderabad, in whose dominions Ramappa lies. Hence the more-or-less modern sluice gates at both ends of the dam. Hence, too, the sign explaining that the reservoir had been built originally in 1213, that it had been reconstructed in 1919, that it had a "waterspread" of nine square kilometers, and that it irrigated 4,860 acres.

A mile before the dam I drove through Palampet, a village with a population of perhaps 500 people. They were all living in one-story buildings, generally poor-looking, though the village lanes did have power lines strung on concrete poles. The lanes headed straight to the surrounding fields, which were dry and in stubble when I saw them; each morning, however, lines of milking buffaloes were led to those fields for grazing; in the evening they came back to enclosures in the village.

Once there had been money in Palampet. You could see it from the large but abandoned houses behind now-collapsed stone walls. The nearby forests still sheltered the militant radicals who a generation earlier had butchered many of the wealthiest local landowners. The rest had got the message, and now there was only a vestige of the old contrast between rich and poor. It was most evident in the village shopkeepers, who were dressed in spotlessly white cotton shirts and skirts and who stood next to massive grain-measuring scales. Behind the scales were tiny rooms jammed floor to ceiling with baskets of tomatoes and green chillies, onions and eggs. An impressive inventory for a village as poor as this? Yes, but this was January, on the eve of a harvest festival when people would buy luxury foods even if they had almost no money. I would have liked to ask these merchants if they feared night visitors, but it didn't seem tactful.

I continued on toward the dam, where I would stay overnight, and on the way I realized there were a dozen temples here, most of them more completely ruined than the main temple, to which the engineers had taken me a decade before. Roofs had collapsed, walls were penetrated by roots, inner sanctums were filled with litter, and the phallic *lingams* that are the sign of Lord Shiva had been knocked over. Even so, the temples were powerful buildings, so massive that from some angles they appeared to be natural outcrops of massive and horizontally bedded rock. In the interval since my first visit, the

Archaeological Survey of India had begun reconstructing some of the structures. Unfortunately, to my taste, the work had brought with it fencing, turf, and flowers, along with guides and hawkers. Still, compared to India's really famous temples, the nuisance was minimal: I could be alone merely by sitting decerebrate for five minutes and ignoring every plea.

And so here I was, back in the main temple, alone. Perhaps the building was fifty feet square, but it had no walls, had not been built with walls. There was only a floor, much disrupted by subsidence, and a heavy roof supported by a set of intricate columns. Many of them were broken, but they were still standing in a gridded array. The effect was to create two horizontal planes, with me sandwiched between.

Most of the columns were of light-colored rock, carved into a complex shape so that they looked like sections of stacked rectangular blocks, octagons, and discs. But in the center of the temple were four shiny black columns, even more elaborately carved and from a kind of rock apparently transported hundreds of miles to this site. These four columns surrounded a patch of floor in the center of the temple that was occupied by a massive circular stone, a very low platform perhaps ten feet in diameter and once used for ritual dancing.

This circular platform faced a doorway into a small room, closed most of the time. Though this room was the functional center of the temple, dedicated to Lord Shiva, it was visually unimportant: the focal point of the temple was that round stone surrounded by the four black columns. The circle defined a point in the horizontal plane already bounded massively by floor and ceiling, and the power of this point just *radiated*, so that sitting in the temple I felt drawn or pulled to the surrounding countryside, and not just in one direction but to every point of the compass.

I walked to the edge of the temple, which is heavily decorated not only with elephants but with sinuous and half-naked female figures. Normally they might be described as mildly erotic, but looking up at them I felt no eroticism at all. Instead I heard silent words: "No, not sexual experience," the figures seemed to say: "but this: the greater self you know only through sexuality."

Now I realize that I am speaking here of architecture rather than of landscape; the same charge might have been leveled against me a chapter ago when I mentioned the Temple of Heaven and the Ming Tombs. But I would argue that the architects of all these places were consciously striving for an effect and that the effect they wanted was to make us understand our place in the cosmos. In a sense I suppose this is no different from the masons who built Chartres, but the European cathedral builder wanted to lift us above the corporeal world. The Asian architect, it seems to me, wanted us to be absorbed in the world we already know.

We can point to a similar mysticism in the West, not least among the Romantic poets and their literary descendants. But this kind of absorption in place is so completely foreign to the modern outlook and to the spirit of economic development that I want to dwell on it further. I want to see if we can get any closer to a true understanding of the quality that makes the Asian countryside so powerful. I want to dwell on it further because it is that countryside I want to preserve, not merely the temples that teach us about our place in the world. Soon enough we shall come to the ideas with which we are so much more comfortable, the ideas that I have labeled as the culture of development.

But this is a case of "easier said than done," for though there are plenty of places in most Asian countries where Western influences are hardly visible at first glance, there are very few, I've found, where a visitor can stand still and feel Asia as it was before the Western wind began to blow.

I remember one brave effort of mine to find such a place. Forty years ago an Indian village called Rani Kheri was studied very nearly to death by Oscar Lewis. Not yet famous for his Hobbesian studies of Latin American poverty, Lewis was then working for the Ford Foundation, which was supporting nearly a hundred expatriates, mostly working on rural development in the country. With commendable acumen the Foundation decided that, since it was working to change half a million Indian villages, there might be a modicum of wisdom in having an anthropologist explore how at least one Indian village worked. Good thinking! Hence Oscar Lewis and *Village Life in North India*.

Rani Kheri lies a convenient 15 miles west of Delhi and two miles off the Rohtak Road. In Lewis' time, the village was approached by a cart track motorable during dry weather, and it was surrounded by several hundred acres of fields. The two crop seasons were the summer, with sorghum and millet, and the winter, with barley and wheat. During the winter, Lewis wrote, farmers depended on canal water and a dozen Persian wheels, those elegant old wooden machines, with a bullock yoked to a wheel mounted like a little merry-go-round. Gear teeth on that wheel mesh with those on another wheel set vertically, and over that second wheel a chain of buckets is draped to hang into the pool below.

The villagers, Lewis continued, were dominated by Jats, a famous farming caste known to work so hard and long that they were reputed by folklore to give their children toy plows. The wealthier Jats lived in substantial brick houses, with decorated doorways opening onto the village's unplanned lanes and revealing to passersby courtyards rimmed with rooms on three sides. Most of the villagers lived in much simpler structures: mud-brick rooms, typically without ventilation. They shared these houses year-round with their livestock, whose dung was faithfully collected and made into discus-shaped patties kept in neat stacks shaped like pup tents. There was not a single commercial

establishment in the village, Lewis wrote, not a single motor vehicle, and visitors were still rare enough that they attracted a crowd of children.

Not bad, I thought: it might do as one approximation of timeless India. I was dead wrong, and readers will guess why as soon as I say that Delhi today has at least 8,000,000 people. Why I wasn't smarter I cannot say. Perhaps because a large-scale map published by the Survey of India in 1970 showed on the western side of the Capital District a large agricultural swath starting some ten miles west of the city center and extending to the Haryana State border, something less than ten miles farther west. At fifteen or so miles from the city center, in other words, Rani Kheri was shown surrounded by fields, just as Lewis described it. The only apparent difference between the village of Lewis's text and the village shown on the Survey's map was that Lewis's old cart track had been replaced by a straight road that started at the main Rohtak Road and headed north, passing a few hundred yards to the east of Rani Kheri.

But 1970 is far away, and I went out along a Rohtak Road lined at first with three-story apartments, oil-storage tanks, and prohibited military areas. By the Rani Kheri turnoff, the buildings had declined to a single story with lots of roadside trees, but the feel was still urban. The old cart track to Rani Kheri was abandoned, but a new road was now dotted with brick walls for residential compounds. Piles of brick were stacked upon on already surveyed lots.

So much for fields! Here, not 200 yards from Rani Kheri, were two real estate offices. Their signs, in English, said Royal Properties, telephone number 5471771, and Kanshik Properties, with plots for sale as well as flats and something called "farm houses" -- presumably houses for the hobby farms that, new to India, have recently begun appearing around Delhi.

At the spot where the new road comes closest to Rani Kheri I found a bus stop, end of the line for Route 921 of the Delhi Municipal Bus Corporation. Along the link road to the village itself there were a dozen or more shops, some renting videos, others selling ready-made clothes. There were grocers with potatoes and tomatoes and onions, with rice and bread and biscuits, eggs, coolers for soft drinks, jars of small candies, pens and paper, lightbulbs, disinfectant, and infant cereal. There was the Deep Chand Memorial Public School (its perplexing motto: Education Is Life), and there was a doctor. None of this, of course, was in Lewis's account; none of it had existed in his time.

The old Jat houses that Lewis describes still stood, but only a very few mud-brick buildings were left, and even the pup tents of dung were now often protected by black plastic sheeting. There were plenty of big new houses, too. Turned ostentatiously outward, they boasted large plastic water tanks on their third-story roofs, which also had TV antennas. (By now, I am sure, someone has a satellite dish to pull in Hong Kong's Star network.) The streets still twisted confusingly, but they were paved with concrete gutters and iron sewer grates.

They were lit with fluorescent tubes. There were even motor vehicles in the village now -- not only heavy trucks but Indian-made Suzukis. Singly or in small groups, old men sat around hookahs, as Lewis had said they did, but, as in Hong Kong's Luk Keng village, during working hours there were few young men.

I walked through the village several times and then out into the surviving fields. It was winter the first time I did this, and the fields were mostly in wheat, but I know from another visit in summer that fodder crops have replaced sorghum. The villagers have begun selling milk to the Delhi market. Village agriculture has become a business, in other words, rather than a subsistence activity. And the farmers are rich enough to have replaced their Persian wheels with motor-driven pumps.

Rani Kheri, in short, is now almost a garden suburb of Delhi. On the way back to the city I measured some distances and found that the village was separated from urban Delhi by no more than a one-mile-wide greenbelt, already under attack by land developers. So much for one doomed attempt of mine to find pristine India.

I tried again, this time some 1,200 miles to the south. Leaving the penumbra of the national capital and the national heartland of the Ganges plains, I flew two hours to Madras and drove south through the intensely cultivated southeastern coast. Not Telangana this: the peninsular rim is densely settled. And here, during World War I, India's first professor of rural economy, Gilbert Slater, had undertaken some pioneering studies of Indian villages. One of the places he studied was a village called Eruvellipet. One of his students came from this place and is even given credit in Slater's *Some South Indian Villages*.

Slater talks there about going by train south from Madras to Villupuram, which lies west of Pondicherry. For the last eight miles of his trip he travels by bicycle and--when that fails--by bullock cart. Eruvellipet, he says, lies on the highway south to Madurai, and the road is lined with trees whose products are auctioned to the villagers. On the left-hand side of the road, as one enters from the north, there is the quarter of the untouchables, with unplanned paths wandering between circular mud huts under thatch roofs. On the right-hand side is the higher-caste village, with two good parallel roads turning off the highway at right angles and forming a rectangular block, with the highway at one narrow end and a connecting street at the other. The houses on this side of the highway are rectangular, with courtyards and a characteristic recess in the frontage wall, a recess that forms a shady platform on which much of Indian domestic life transpires. Slater talks of the village lands, of irrigation and the rice economy, and of the village's low labor productivity. India, he says in one telling sentence, is "a very rich country, inhabited by very poor people."

I went to take a look. This was January, and the rice harvest was in full swing, with women cutting the grain with sickles and, under head loads, marching off

to threshing grounds. It was a good harvest, and the people at the threshing grounds were happy. Lifting handfuls of the unthreshed stalks, men swung them like an axe against a cylindrical stone that looked like an elephant's foot. The grain flew in clouds and was raked by women into perfectly circular piles perhaps twelve feet across and five feet all, as high as unhusked rice will stack in a pile of that width. At one threshing ground I counted six such piles, along with much larger piles of straw. Straight Brueghel, I thought, despite the noise coming from a radio whose speaker could not accommodate the power forced through it.

Long stretches of road were bordered by fields of stubble and by blanket-sized patches of threshed grain, neatly spread to dry and carefully watched by women and children. The rice when dry would be bagged in jute sacks that, when filled, would weigh 220 pounds-- the hundred kilograms of the metric quintal. The straw, perhaps mounded next to a big mango tree, would be tightly tied with a net so that the stack was perfectly domed. Against one such stack there leaned a bamboo ladder with a dozen mortised rungs fitted without a single nail.

Other farmers were further ahead in the annual crop cycle. They had already transplanted the next crop's seedlings into wet paddies, the moisture evaporating into a sweating sky. That meant irrigation, and at one point I stopped at a large open well, almost like a small flooded quarry.

The surrounding fields were being irrigated by a man and two bullocks. They pulled a rope strung over a pulley that was mounted between two posts inclined over the water; an exotic copper bucket, with a long fabric spout attached to its base like an elephant's trunk, hung from the other end of the rope. The animals took ten steps forward to lift the bucket and ten backward to let it return to the water. The man who drove them also controlled a second rope that let the "trunk" down when the bucket came to the top of the well: perhaps ten gallons of water gushed out into the head of a small channel leading to the rice paddies. It was a beautifully coordinated operation, for the man sat down on the main rope just as the bullocks reached the forward position; his movement gave the rope a tug, which made the bucket swing a little bit so it would empty entirely through the trunk. For some minutes I stood listening to the music of the pulley, of the gushing, of the man grunting at the bullocks, and of the gallon or so of water that splashed back into the well at each cycle.

When I got to Villupuram, the town where Slater had got off the train from Madras, an old steam locomotive sat fired up on a siding. I followed Slater's directions onto the Madras-Madurai highway, and headed south to the South Pennar River, where his bicycle had bogged down in deep sand. There was a good bridge now, and I drove across.

A few miles later I came to a village. Was it Eruvellipet? I asked several people, but my pronunciation was so wretched that they did not understand what I wanted. Certainly the streets didn't conform to Slater's description, but perhaps things had changed. I turned down one of the few lanes not piled with mountains of rice straw. It was straight, unpaved, and lined with rectangular, good-sized homes of mud and thatch. Electricity went into most of them; there were street lights; at one point two men came rumbling past me on a throaty Indian motorcycle. And that was not all: there were mechanical rice threshers at work -- three or four men and a Caterpillar-yellow mobile machine, perhaps six feet high by twelve feet long. The men removed its wheels and put it on the ground, where the machine ate armloads of grain from a nearby stack. A pile of threshed but unhusked rice slowly grew. When they were done, the men levered the machine off the ground, put its wheels back on, and headed for a new customer.

But was it Eruvellipet? The question was settled when I drove a few miles farther down the highway and found a highway sign: Iruvelpattu. Obviously this was the place, differently transliterated. And, just as Slater had written, the village straddled the road, with huts on one side and solid houses on the other. I hesitated to walk through the untouchable quarter: even in the better parts of an Indian village I am always slightly uncomfortable, not because the villagers are hostile--they never are, in my experience--but because I fear that I am slumming. Still, it was plain from a distance that the untouchables' houses were hidden in compounds rimmed with six-foot gates of roughly woven twigs.

The upper-caste village, on the other hand, was organized around the very same block of which Slater had written: there had been no expansion in 75years--hardly any visible change except for concrete power poles with fluorescent tubes. Here were the lane-fronting walls of mud brick, each house presenting to the street not only a doorway but a built-in bench perhaps a foot and a half high, four or five feet deep, and shaded by the roof thatching. On one such platform a woman with elegant earrings and a nose plug was grinding a poppy-yellow bean paste in a stone mortar and pestle. In Madras I had seen electric grinders available for about a hundred dollars; here in Eruvellipet a hundred dollars was a fortune for most people, and the woman pulled the pestle round and round with that immemorial sound of stone rolling on stone. Another porch was occupied by two goats; a third, by the man of the house and his toddler son.

The real shock lay around the corner, on the more southerly of the two main streets. Here was a stretch of at least 150 feet bordered by an iron fence. At the center of that span was a gate and a thatched-over walkway leading perhaps 40 feet to a two-story white house. Its roof line was trimmed with a parapet, and its entrance porch was supported by massive wooden columns that were solid, darkly handsome, and artistically tapered upwards from a diameter of perhaps eighteen inches at the base.

What was such a mansion doing here? There was a gatekeeper who spoke no English. He let me pass, accompanied me to the columned porch, and sat me down. I admired the columns and stared at five framed photographs hanging over the doorway and showing proudly turbaned men.

The owner came out: Mr. Appaji, with more flesh than any of the villagers around the corner, lighter in skin color, and dressed in immaculate white. A 1953 graduate of Loyola College in Madras, he explained that the center photograph -- the most regal of the lot -- was his grandfather, who had built this house in 1901 and who had owned 1,000 acres spread over four or five villages.

Land-reform laws in recent decades had come down hard on Mr. Appaji: today he owned only 100 acres. Sixty of those were irrigated with a tube well, which had replaced the manual devices of his grandfather's time. Forty were unirrigated, though unirrigated land was of such comparatively low value that when I initially asked how much land he owned Mr. Appaji simply said "seventy acres," as though 40 unirrigated acres were worth ten irrigated ones.

Almost every Indian knows the word *benami*: it describes the nominal land transactions by which many, if not most, large ownerships have been divided among family members and friends so that the legal land ceilings are evaded. Certainly the inadequacy of India's land reform greatly exercised the World Bank's Wolf Ladejinsky. He was the man who had shaped the land reform of post-World War II Japan. In the 1970s he was working in India for the World Bank, and he is said to have once tried to explain the importance of genuine land reform to Indira Gandhi--and never to have tried that again.

So, despite land reform, Mr. Appaji's house was very well maintained, and he had plenty of servants. There was little Western furniture, other than the porch chairs on which we sat, but Mr. Appaji had a telephone and a television. The most spectacular thing he had, I thought, was a spotlessly clean stable, with 15 milking buffaloes and cows standing on pavement and shaded by tile-roofed mangers. The animals and their calves ate green fodder from neat bunkers; there was a concrete watering trough filled by a tap. I have never seen such facilities in India except at experiment stations, and I was reminded of the contrast between this setup and the Lahore dairies that a young and thoroughly disgusted Rudyard Kipling had once described.

At first I thought that Slater had been blind to miss the Appaji household, but I went back and found that the mistake was mine: Slater had indeed seen the Appaji house. He writes, unmistakably, that there is one house in the village that is "imposing, with two stories, a flat roof, a covered approach, ornamental iron gates and pillars adorned with paintings." He further notes without comment that the average village landholder owns one acre but that the largest landholder in the village owns six hundred. And he says that the large

landholders of the village are all members of the Reddy caste, identifiable by their lighter skin color. When I asked Mr. Appaji if he knew of a Mr. E. V Sundaram Reddy--Slater's student--he said that he did indeed. Reddy was now dead, Mr. Appaji said, but he had been a prominent lawyer, and a relative.

Surely I should have been able to do something with Eruvellipet, find here some opening into the pristine countryside I wanted. Granted, pristine India was not an India with telephones and straight village lanes; there is even a possibility that the pattern of one large landowner in a village, along with many small ones, is a consequence of British land-revenue policies. But there was plenty here to work with, plenty to prod a visitor into seeing India as it had been.

Yet I was stuck. I had met Mr. Appaji and been treated courteously; I had walked the village block and taken a batch of pictures. I had satisfied myself that much. But I could go no further. There was no place to stay in the village, and the usual idiotic itinerary had me driving miles more that day. I didn't know quite what to do except leave Eruvellipet, which I did with a feeling that this was pretty stupid, walking away from something with potential.

But I had learned long ago that things seem to work out in India, if you relax. With the vaguest of plans I went to Bangladesh, where I quit retracing the steps of academics and began visiting the places where writers had lived when they were children. I set out to visit Narayanganj, which is Dhaka's port city and the place where the young Rumer Godden lived; then I would go fifty miles north to the small town of Kishorganj, home of the youthful Nirad Chaudhuri.

At first things went badly. I was lucky enough to find the old Godden home, heavy with the atmosphere of a ruined mansion. An old and long-unused lawn roller sat in one corner of a big garden; an immense classical facade and its veranda shutters were in poor shape, with the garden literally moving upstairs, tendril by tendril. Old armoires were now filled with the files of the government ferry corporation clerks who occupied the building. The building itself was swallowed up in the city of Narayanganj, with a jute mill on the river side of the house and endless concrete blocks on the other. For my purposes, there was nothing.

Nor did I have better luck at Kishorganj. Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* is filled--as are its lengthy sequel and his other works--with a keen astringency, an almost militant rejection of every form of sentiment. Yet he makes an exception for Kishorganj and writes of the boy he was, who walked barefoot along dusty lanes and felt sorry for people condemned to wear shoes and feel nothing. Kishorganj, moreover, is still a small place, with tin-roofed shacks on either side of a town-dividing creek. But the town no longer has a good neighborhood on one side, a bad on the other. The mat-and-thatch huts in which Chaudhuri lived are gone, and if I understand the town correctly from Chaudhuri's description, the site of Chaudhuri's father's hut is now

occupied by some large brick houses, trimmed with wrought iron fencing and barbed wire.

It was about this time that, discouraged by my inability to find a pristine India, I picked up a guidebook called *Buildings of the British Raj in Bangladesh*, written by the archaeologist Nazimuddin Ahmed. In it there is a description of the Silaidaha Kutibar, the home in which the poet Rabindranath Tagore lived as a young man. Ahmed writes that there are "few places in Bangladesh which can equal Silaidaha in its enchanting natural beauty and its unspoiled rural landscape." I would probably have paid no attention, except Chaudhuri calls the oceanic Tagore the greatest of all Bengalis. Such praise from Chaudhuri is remarkable, and I decided to take a look.

Silaidaha is not the easiest trip to make. The nearest town is Kushtia, and getting that far involves a 60-mile drive west from Dhaka through heavily irrigated lowlands to the Brahmaputra. From there you can choose between a southerly route with a short ferry ride across the Brahmaputra and then--at least in 1991--an insane drive of infinite duration over about a hundred miles of road under construction. The northern route calls for a longer ferry ride across and up the Brahmaputra, then a drive another 60 miles west to the town of Pabna, followed by a second but short ferry across the Ganges.

Pabna is just about the only place to stop for the night along this second route, and it was a good place for me to look around. Bangladesh, after all, has such a hopeless reputation: endless calamities and infinite destitution. But a two hours' walk there at dusk cured me forever of thinking of the country as that "international basket case."

Piles of magenta mustard seed were spread out to dry on outdoor pavements; later, they were brought to mill rooms dark with belt-driven machinery expressing an oil that made my eyes smart. Next door were carpenters, some splitting and sawing logs, others screwing planks together to form the seats of cycle rickshaws. There was a concrete-casting works, with piles of pipe and ornamental screenings and squat toilets that it had produced. There were shops where men assembled cotton undershirts with treadle sewing machines; others where the same machines were sewing automobile seatcovers. There were electricians rewinding electrical motors. There were merchants selling sandals, and others selling hand tractors.

Off Pabna's main road and in the residential quarters of the town horticulturalists grew flowers in plots fenced with sharpened bamboo stakes; nearby, there were houses from whose windows came the sound of the BBC. Young men literally crowded around a big table in the town library, which itself was one of the dozens of mansions abandoned at the partition of India in 1947. Rabindranath Tagore's family, like Nirad Chaudhuri's, had been part of the Hindu elite; indeed, the Tagores had once been among the wealthiest families

of Bengal: Silaidaha was only one of their properties when Rabindranath was sent there by his father in the 1880s to be the estate manager. Tagore had spent the better part of 20 years there, and he returned to it to translate into English the poems that, published as *Gitanjali*, won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913.

The Ganges ferry beyond Pabna is a comparatively simple matter: hardly more than an old barge with a strapped-on motor. But the river itself is much reduced from its historic size by the construction upstream in India of the Farakka Barrage, which diverts a large part of the Ganges to another distributary, the Hooghly, which flows past Calcutta. The barge chugs across the reduced Ganges peaceably enough, at least in comparison with the strong flow of the Brahmaputra, and there is a fine view of the nearby and mile-long Hardinge Bridge, which was opened in 1915 and remains the bravest of all the British efforts to lace Bengal with steel.

The first time I came to Kushtia it was in April and by the misbegotten way along the highway under construction. Exhausted, I threw myself on the mercy of the deputy commissioner. He was kind enough to ask in only a slightly patronizing way if he was correct in surmising that I "required a room, a cool room, I believe." He also asked if I required alcohol. (In this teetotal country he was offering vodka left over from the visit of a Russian diplomat.) The deputy commissioner reached out a languid arm--his own house was not air-conditioned--picked up a phone, and arranged air-conditioned accommodation at the Kushtia District guest house.

I wanted to see Tagore's home as early as possible the next morning, so my driver and I left the guest house at first light, just before six. A baker down the street was furiously kneading dough for his morning customers. With some hesitation we made our way to an unbridged river, whose small amount of water was a trickle in the middle of several hundred yards of sand. The driver was from Dhaka and had not been here before. He was nervous, especially when told by people crossing the river on foot to drive right across. When we approached the water he took on board a guide who could show us where to drive through the axle-deep water.

Now we were on what turned out to be an island, bounded by this sandstream on the west and by the Ganges on the east ahead. On the island lay Silaidaha and the Tagore home. From neither this nor my subsequent winter visit, when I stayed on the island itself, do I remember a single other motor vehicle on the island. I can see trucks and buses crossing the sand. But I cannot see them on the island.

Tagore's house stands some seven or eight brick-paved, single-lane miles beyond the crossing. It is close to the Ganges but as a building is not particularly interesting: wood, red, with two stories, laid out with a square

floor plan about 40 feet on a side. It has verandas on the upper floor, a hipped roof, and a cupola capped with a steeple. It also has a most peculiar wall: red brick with a white cap that undulates like a snaking jump rope.

I had thought that the house might be locked up or used as a private residence, but I underestimated Tagore's reputation, even in Muslim Bangladesh. The house is now a museum, run by the government. It is well maintained, though with an emphasis on wall displays of photographs. Most of the original furnishings are gone; the most interesting relic is an ancient lawnmower with the embossed name of a manufacturer in Newburgh, New York. The most interesting room in the house is actually the cupola, barely big enough for a desk but walled with shutters that still open for a view to the Ganges. It was here, apparently, that Tagore sat while he wrote the poems that entranced William Butler Yeats. I thought of John Muir and his cupola in Martinez, California.

I went outside and started walking. And there, on a lane close by, was a boy about ten years old, dressed in a Western undershirt and a Bengali wraparound. He was standing with his feet buried a couple of inches in the dust. I thought of Nirad Chaudhuri and of my compromising sandals.

Here were houses, too, like the ones Chaudhuri remembered. Gabled or hip-roofed, they were mostly covered with corrugated sheetmetal. The walls, however, were either mudded mud brick or simple reed matting. Chaudhuri had written of such things--not only of the sheet metal, which was replacing thatch by the turn of the century--but also of the mud-brick and reed-mat walls. Today, as then, the walls were scrupulously maintained, so the buildings look forever new, their colors indistinguishable from the earth on which they stand. In a fine book called *An Indian Attachment*, Sarah Lloyd writes of Punjabi farmers "growing" their houses, and you know what she means when you see houses of mud and sticks that have been dug and chopped from the land they stand on.

The extensive pumping facilities developed for irrigation east of the Brahmaputra have not reached out to Silaidaha, so most of the island's fields produce only one crop annually. That's why when I first came, in the hot weather, most of the fields were fallow, with hard and light-brown clods. A whiff of onions came through the air from one field that did get water from a well, but the only activity I saw was men coming to prepare the fallow fields. Like the boy, they wore only undershirts and wraparounds. Each man led a pair of bullocks, and each man carried a plow and a mallet. The plows could not have weighed more than 40 pounds: they consisted essentially of three pieces of wood--one for the handle, one for the share, one to reach to the yoke. The mallet was more interesting. Long-handled and with a solid cylinder of wood as a hammer, it puzzled me until the men went to work, smashing clods one at a time.

In a few months the fields would be flooded for rice: that was why the paths that ran through the fields were elevated perhaps eight inches above the level of the ground. After the floods had come and long gone, I returned a second time. The ground was still mostly fallow, but on the few irrigated fields I saw this time people were busy with a sugarcane harvest. This was not the stout kind of cane typically found in India; it was so spindly that the stalks growing in the field were tied together in bundles of nine.

Cane crushing was handled on the spot, with two metal drums set vertically and driven by a bullock walking round and round. Canes were thrust one at a time between the revolving drums to produce a trickle of straw-colored juice, which was collected in five-gallon tins quickly emptied into a furnace with a dozen or so uncovered boiling pans. Not one of the pans held more than a gallon of liquid, but a man sat above the furnace with a long-handled ladle and poured fluid from one pan to another with the nicety of titration. From the last pan he periodically drew off a heavy brown liquid. There, in yet more tins, the local process ended -- short of the solid blocks of brown sugar produced so commonly in rural India.

Most of the houses in the neighborhood were not bunched in hamlets but stood as isolated homesteads marked by mangoes, palms, and great stacks of rice straw. I approached one that covered perhaps half an acre, but the compound was well screened by a beautiful herringbone-woven reed fence, and I could hardly see anything beyond the hipped roof of corrugated metal, supported by walls of mudded mud brick pierced by tiny windows with bamboo grates. I saw no one inside the compound except a few women at work in an outdoor kitchen, and I turned away.

I came to another farmstead and, nearby, a simple bridge across a dry wash. I sat down on the bridge railing to watch a couple of bullocks nibbling straw from a large, coarsely woven basket. Nearby, there was a haystack from which the animals had nibbled until it was almost undermined; beyond, there were huts on smooth, shaded dirt.

Two or three young men came up and stared. One of them, it turned out, had studied at a college in Kushtia, and he struggled with his English to explain that the farmstead in front of us belonged to a relative--a poor man--but I was welcome to look.

And so I walked around that immaculate courtyard, which had buildings on all four sides. Each was raised on a mudded platform about two feet high, and each was built of mats and thatch--no mud brick here, except for the platforms. Against one wall stood a bicycle and a couple of utensils--a bowl, a water pot, a bamboo pole. Against another wall leaned one of those plows, as elegant as a fishing rod. In a corner between two buildings there was a screened-in kitchen, a patch of ground on which a girl perhaps ten years old

squatted to tend a few pots. She wore a Western-style dress, yellow like cornbread.

The young man now wanted to take me to his own home, which was a couple of hundred yards away. A dozen people were soon crowded into a small room, which was furnished with only a bed and a bench. Though he was a college graduate, he had no job. I avoided the foolish question about working the family's land, for as soon as we made it to his house he disappeared for a moment and returned wearing a long-sleeved shirt.

His mother appeared in widow's white and through her son half-insisted that I eat breakfast. She reappeared in a few minutes with a large bowl of leathery puffed rice, sweetened with crude sugar. It was fine, but the family was disappointed, and I hope no more than that, when I repeatedly declined the water they offered.

I thanked them and wandered alone along the river. Music far away on the Pabna side drifted across, so little impeded that when I first heard it I thought that a man standing in the shallows in front of me must be holding a tiny radio. I think now of one of Tagore's untitled poems, *Gitanjali* 74:

The evening air is eager with the sad music of the water. Ah, it calls me out into the dusk. In the lonely lane there is no passerby, the wind is up, the ripples are rampant in the river.

I know not if I shall come back home. I know not whom I shall chance to meet. There at the fording in the little boat the unknown man plays upon his lute.

The Ganges here is calm all the time, now that the Farakka Barrage is in place. When I saw it, the water's surface offered a perfect reflection of the small boats that moved up and down, sometimes with motors, sometimes with sweeps, sometimes with one man walking on the shore and pulling a rope attached to the top of the mast.

In the Silaidaha evenings I saw almost no electric lights. One small electrically driven rice mill shut down by dark. Oil lanterns were ignited in people's homes and on the rear axles of the cycle rickshaws clustered at the occasional road crossings. It was a long time until the sun rose, and children gathered at dawn around small bonfires lit to repel the chill made worse by the damp.

The sun rose magnificently, and I think now of *Gitanjali* 57, where Tagore writes of "Light, my light, the world-filling light, the eye-kissing light, heart-sweetening light!" The difference is that I see a spectacular sunrise and Tagore sees divinity. It's like the Muskogee ballsticks, and there's not much doubt about it, for Tagore continues (*Gitanjali* 59):

Yes, I know, this is nothing but thy love, O beloved of my heart --
this golden light that dances upon the leaves, these idle clouds
sailing across the sky, this passing breeze leaving its coolness
upon my forehead.

It would be a mistake, I think, to take these lines metaphorically. I think they are absolutely literal. That is why Tagore seems so obsessive to us, for little else matters to him but the glimpse of divinity. "Under thy great sky in solitude and silence," he writes in *Gitanjali* 76, "with humble heart shall I stand before thee face to face?"

What makes all this so difficult for us is not Tagore's faith but his sense that we are in a universe inconceivably full of life, growing in every direction -- and going nowhere. That where we have trouble. Oh, we know better rationally, but we insist that progress somehow not only makes us comfortable but goes someplace. Not Tagore: he will have none of this nonsense; he shames us in our narrowness.

I imagine that he must have been sitting in that little Silaldaha cupola when he looked across the island toward the river and wrote in one of *Gitanjali's* last poems (92):

When I think of this end of my moments, the barrier of the
moments breaks and I see by the light of death thy world with its
careless treasures. Rare is its lowliest seat, rare is its meanest of
lives.

Things that I longed for in vain and things that I got -- let them
pass. Let me but truly possess the things that I ever spurned and
overlooked.

You can climb up to the cupola yourself. You can swing open the shutters on all sides. Here he sat, you may think, when he wrote in *Gitanjali* 96: "When I go from hence let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable."

*Revised 2004 but not updated from Chapter 2 of *Losing Asia, Modernization and the Culture of Development*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.