The colors and beauty and unsightliness of India

Gail Schoettler

Gail Schoettler shares personal glimpses of a country in transition, a country of contrasts.

The roads are truly awful. Buses and trucks all have a spotter riding shotgun who warns the driver of anything in the way the driver can’t see, hops out to stop traffic if necessary (virtually impossible), hustles up water and bananas, does whatever needs to be done. The near misses are so near as to stop your heart. An inch is a large distance.

People drive on whichever side of the road they like or in the middle. Even on a divided road with a median, many vehicles come at you headed the wrong way in your lane. Smack in the middle of the road, you can see countless trucks, often so overloaded you can barely see the truck; graceful women with huge loads on their heads; thousands of pedestrians; dogs sleeping; cows chewing their cuds; carts pulled by camels, people, bicycles, cows, water buffalo, sometimes miniature horses and tractors; elephants (in the north); countless bicycles and motor scooters; cars of all vintages; and many wheezy old buses often so packed with people that some of the passengers are hanging onto the outside.

The horn is a constant, used in place of prudence and caution by all drivers. There are signs that say “use lane discipline” in a hopeless attempt to put some order into the driving chaos, but they mean nothing. Motor scooters careen between trucks and busses, seemingly mindless of the near disasters; bicyclists hang onto trucks to move themselves along, adding to the dangerous conditions. Vehicles swerve in and out of the mass of traffic, animals, and humanity, making me think that the drivers – and pedestrians – believe this life is simply a transition into another so it doesn’t matter much what happens here.

We averaged 20 mph traveling from place to place, so even relatively short distances required many hours of driving. Most roads are barely two lanes but you’d never know that as no one pays attention to lanes anyway. Surprisingly, we saw only three accidents.

India is spending a lot of money on improving the roads but it has so far to go. The new roads will have four lanes for a mile or so, then will divert back to two lanes for many miles, and back and forth. When a new road needs to take a right of way from a shop or home owner, the fronts of the buildings are simply bulldozed; actually they are chopped off where needed by hand, leaving miles of empty rooms with walls jutting out into the new roadway. Guess the owners just move their belongings back a room or so.

Much of the road construction is hand labor. Men use picks and shovels. Women use baskets to cart away rocks and dirt. Scores of people pick away at the ground, moving tiny amounts at a time, then haul rocks and more dirt by hand back to the new road for a road base. The asphalt is dumped by truck, but moved into place by hand. Barrels are used to heat tar, which is then poured on top of the rocky asphalt and smoothed by hand. Women carry baskets of sand to throw on top of the hot asphalt and someone else rakes it into place. I did see some small rollers to tamp it all down but this is, indeed, a full employment effort.

Trash is everywhere. We visited the botanical gardens in Bangalore, which are quite beautiful if you can ignore the trash. Students throw trash out their windows onto the balconies of classrooms below. Trash fills the medians of the divided roadways, every ditch and every backyard. Cows and dogs roam through it looking for tasty garbage and goats munch just about everything in the trash pile.

Our bus spotter took a box of our banana peels and empty water bottles and simply dumped them out the door of the bus. I think it is so much part of life that no one thinks about it. People throw their trash on the sidewalk, if such exists (which is rare) or the roadway as they walk along. There are some government signs urging people to deposit their garbage in bins, but that has had no effect. We did see one garbage truck, but only one. It will take an unbelievable effort to change Indian habits and the government has much more to think about now than that.
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Cows, too, are everywhere. Apparently, centuries ago a Hindu leader told the people they should hold cows sacred because they give milk, which is so important in Indian life. But once a cow has stopped producing milk, its owners perform a ceremony and turn it loose to fend for herself. Consequently, there are millions of scrawny cows everywhere — in the centers of the crowded cities as well as in the rural areas. They survive by rummaging in the abundant trash heaps for food.

Occasionally I would see a fortunate cow that had found some discarded vegetables in the trash. I saw one cow nosing through an unproductive garbage pile until she found a piece of newspaper which she proceeded to munch down. All the abandoned dogs and pigs also pick through the trash for something to eat so I guess the garbage does serve a purpose. Productive cows and goats are fed, but I didn’t see any dog that was a pet.

Many cows have been painted yellow, presumably so their owners would know which ones are theirs. Lots of them have painted or decorated horns. I think the forage must be very low in nutrition because although there is a fair amount to eat, the cows are very skinny. Some of that may be attributable to the breed.

In contrast to these grimy conditions, everywhere in India bougainvillea splashes brilliant reds, pinks, oranges and purple. You can see them on every wall, fence and hedge, in the medians of divided roads, on the walls of houses. The saris women wear are something to behold; they are so beautiful. Every truck is decorated with flowers, tassels, paintings, gods and lots of color. There are brightly colored temples wherever you look. The color is particularly vibrant during the dry season when the fields and forests haven’t yet turned green.

I finally understand Delhi and New Delhi. The British moved their Indian capital to Delhi around 1900, creating a “new” Delhi just outside of old Delhi. It is quite lovely, with wide streets, lots of trees and parks and flowers.

Agriculture, like road construction, is completely un-mechanized. In six hours of driving from Bangalore to Kabini, I did not see a single tractor. The main crops are sugar cane, rice, truck crops and other grains. Plowing is done by ox and man, usually tramping knee deep through muck behind the plow. I guess it’s easier to plow the clay soil when it’s wet. Women are the ones carrying heavy loads by hand – or, really, by head. You see them by the dozens with huge bundles of sugar cane or rice sacks or water on their heads. The men carry loads in ox carts or brutally overloaded trucks and bicycles.

Villages now have several wells where women can get water that is perhaps not too polluted. Women still do the laundry in the river or in very dirty lakes.

Most of our guides told us that the government had outlawed dowries and that they were a thing of the past. They also said that the caste system was gone.

I talked to Rakesh, our tour manager, a wonderful man who traveled with us throughout India, about marriages. He said that caste is very important, something I heard confirmed over and over in casual conversation when many people identified themselves to me by saying they were from such and such a caste. Few people marry outside their caste, they said.

Rakesh’s marriage was arranged. He told me he didn’t meet or see his wife until their wedding day. Except for the highest castes and richest people, all marriages are arranged, he said. Dowries, though outlawed, are negotiated as part of every marriage. “The government may have said ‘no’ to dowries, but it’s our custom.”
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I asked Rakesh how he felt about having his parents arrange his marriage. “My parents and grandparents had the experience of life,” he told me, “and I did not. They knew best how to choose for me. Marriage can happen two ways: love then marriage or marriage then love.”

Brides go to live with their husband’s family. Most families include the husband’s parents, the husband and wife and their children, often the husband’s grandparents. They all occupy one small house, usually with no more than two bedrooms. Rakesh told me that when there are children, the husband’s parents move from their bedroom to the couch because “they don’t really need a separate space since they spend most of their time praying and preparing for the next life.”

Rakesh said dowries still cause some terrible things to happen. He was referring to the “kitchen fires” in which a woman’s husband or in-laws douse her with gasoline and set her on fire, claiming she was killed by a “kitchen fire.” This is to enable the family to get another bride and a bigger dowry next time.

Caste is pretty obvious when you’re in the rural areas. Much of India has no wood for fuel so women take fresh cow manure, mix it with straw and shape it into large rounds about a foot in diameter and an inch or two thick. You can see these rounds drying alongside the road and in the fields around houses. Once dried, they’re stacked, often in artistic ways, around houses to use for cooking. Some of these patties are sold as well. It is an efficient fuel if unappealing to make (and probably to smell). The women responsible for making the cow dung fuel are the lowest caste.

We visited Udaipur, in the state of Rajathan, and walked around the city for hours. It is cleaner than most of the cities we visited but only in the tourist areas. Once you leave those, you see the same huge garbage dumps everywhere — along the streets and every vacant space, even the yards of houses.

As we walked along the river that feeds Udaipur’s lake, we saw people bathing and washing their clothes. The water is filthy but the people want to be clean and this is their only choice. Some were in their underwear, obviously having washed their only set of clothes, which was drying in the sun. They buy soap and shampoo in single packets (an invention of Unilever, which found this was a size people could afford), and scrub themselves and their clothes on the rocks or concrete before rinsing in the river. People wash themselves and their laundry in every patch of water, from ponds to rivers to village wells.

The streets in Udaipur are lined with tiny shops. The proprietors live inside, sleeping on the floor or a counter on thin mattresses. A lot of cooking occurs outside the shop in the street. I’m sure many people simply eat from the street stalls that are everywhere. The shops are mostly dark since electricity is very expensive.

I didn’t see any water supply inside the shops. In the rural areas, the World Bank has funded well drilling to provide people with clean water in their villages. As you drive along, you’ll see lots of people congregated around the village well, pumping water into buckets and urns.

Because of its massive deforestation and a long drought over the past few years, India has enormous water problems. When the monsoon hits in the summer, the water pours off the denuded hillsides taking the topsoil with it. There is no natural plant cover to hold the water in place. The large lake in Udaipur which supplies the city’s water was dry last year. This year, it’s full but people are very worried about the future. Erosion has cost India millions of acres of good farmland. Now plots are often so small that people can’t support themselves. We did not see hunger, however.

In the midst of extreme poverty and misery, there are magnificent palaces of the maharajas (a maharaja is elevated to maharana if he or his forbears were extremely brave in battle). The palace walls used to be studded with jewels but most of these have been removed over the years. There is a wealth of gold and
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silver, beautiful paintings, lovely inlaid walls and ceilings. They are really spectacular and, obviously, an important tourist attraction all over India and particularly in the north.

The City Palace in Udaipur is still occupied by the current maharana, whom we saw driving a shiny red MG out of his palace one evening. He owns a lot of land and the main lake and, reportedly, is trying to develop local businesses and attract foreign investment for economic development. He is in his late 60s with a magnificent white beard and a sweeping, perfectly groomed, handlebar moustache.

There are many beautiful villas as well. On the street right outside many of these large homes, using the outside wall as a back wall, are lean-tos. The contrast of the villas lined outside by shanties is remarkable. Poor people use every space possible to build their own homes. We saw homes made of scraps of plastic, straw and thatch, discarded bricks, whatever the builders could find.

The poverty in India is no worse than in Mexico or Rio de Janeiro, but the numbers are so huge.

Everyone we met was very warm but there is an undercurrent of rage I saw on a number of occasions. In one village, as we walked along, a group of young girls ran up to us asking for money. They were smiling and laughing as they called out to us. As we passed and said “no,” I looked back at one of the girls who yelled an Indian obscenity at us, baring her teeth.

A man herding goats snarled at us when we said hello and a man outside our bus selling balloons smiled at first but when we didn’t buy from him, started beating on the bus, yelling angrily at us. One vendor said, “You are from America and I am a very poor man.”