

***IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MARCO POLO: AN INDIA DIARY***

*A brief record of a week's visit in 2002*

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*Note: photos from this visit - Hyderabad and Warangal - can be found at:  
<http://cid-459178c2f5215f32.photos.live.com/browse.aspx/INDIA> (images 17 to 30)*

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***'India, the admirable circumstances of which shall be related ...'***

*(Marco Polo's Travels, 1298 - Book III, Chapter I)*

*Saturday, 9 February*

Through the thin drizzling rain, the taxi negotiates a glass-and-concrete wilderness of office towers and building sites. It is 9 a.m. I arrive at Frankfurt airport for the 11.30 flight by Delta Air Lines to Mumbai (as the city better known as Bombay is now officially called). I am invited to South India for a brief lecture tour in Andhra Pradesh state. It will take in Kakatiya University in Warangal, where I already know my host, the Head of the English Department, and then the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages in Hyderabad. It is my second visit to India: the first was for three months in 1991. On that occasion the furthest south I got was Goa: my two destinations are actually geographically further north, but South India is a cultural concept and they, as Dravidian-language localities, are considered southern where Aryan-belt Goa is not. With letter of invitation and Indian railpass in my pocket, pouch round my waist and first-aid kit in my suitcase, I am all cued up - and, I hope, clued up - for a week in the subcontinent. My lecture texts are in my briefcase, and I have left backup copies on my email server. Two hours to go, and if no mishaps intervene I will be cleaving the skies, heading towards Bombay for the second time in my existence ...

At the check-in desk, to my surprise, I am not allocated a seat number. Instead they hand me a piece of paper telling me that my seat will be 'assigned at the gate approximately 10 to 45 minutes before departure'. I find this strange but conclude it must be a post-11 September precaution. I endure not one but two security checks and finally reach the gate. On arrival I am brusquely informed that I will be denied boarding. No arguments avail: they say another 11 passengers are in the same position. I have been overbooked. The docile functionaries of the US airline give me a hotel voucher for the night and reassign me to a flight in 26 hours' time. I will have to fly Lufthansa to Kuwait, wait two hours and then change to a Kuwait Airlines flight for Bombay. George W. Bush's 'axis of evil' speech against Iraq and Iran is still hot news: this may not be the best moment for an unplanned stopover in the Gulf. They also hand me a compensation voucher worth 750 greenbacks. I go away fuming - overbooking is one of those things you read about but never think will happen to you - and spend the best part of the day phoning, faxing and emailing to change my meticulously planned and rigorously coordinated travel arrangements. Tonight's sleep is not exactly my best ever.

*Sunday, 10 February*

Right on time at 1.05 p.m., to my immense relief, Lufthansa actually keep their word and begin to propel me into the blue heavens. The woman in the seat next to me is a medical researcher from Sweden. She too is on a lecture tour: she will be giving papers in Kuwait, Jordan and Abu Dhabi on foetal scanning, and explains that this is a subject of major interest in countries where women still routinely have ten children. As I try to imagine such a prospect in the twenty-first century, the plane heads downward and Kuwait city comes into view. It is dark, but the regular grid pattern is clearly visible. At the airport, check-in for the connecting flight proceeds smoothly. I watch men in flowing Arab dress mingle with headscarfed but unveiled female travellers. I pay for a cup of tea with a one-dollar bill.

On the Kuwait Airlines plane, my fellow passengers appear to be almost entirely Indian émigrés working in the Gulf. I dine on boiled chicken and sip orange juice. This is a strictly non-alcoholic flight, of course, but I need no stimuli to fall into my first proper, undisturbed sleep since the stand-off with Delta. I wake up just before 5 a.m., Indian time, as we prepare to land in Bombay.

*Monday, 11 February*

Yes, my overstrained feet and overbooked self are finally on Indian soil. Once off the plane, I take out my cellphone, and watch as the connection surfaces. Courtesy of the BPL Mobile company, I dial home to Europe and announce my safe arrival. The sound is crystal-clear. Such instant transglobal communication was still unimaginable when I was last at this airport, a mere eleven years ago. In the meantime the airport, like the city, has changed its name, from the manageable Sahar to the abrasive-sounding Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport Terminal II. Shivaji was a Marathi warrior not renowned for his peaceable habits, and this and other name-changes reflect the power of communalist forces here in Maharashtra state. The warm night is charged with the sultry tropical odour which I recall from eleven years ago: the typical olfactory experience of Bombay, reminding me of slightly overripe mangoes. It is far from unpleasant to breathe this in, and the moment of recognition makes me realise it is good to be back.

At Immigration, I produce visa and letter of invitation and am waved through. I change a few hundred dollar bills for a thick wad of rupee notes, and am careful to ask the clerk to unstaple them. As I am a day late, I have to change my original channel plans. I have missed the Bombay-Warangal train for which I had painstakingly acquired a railpass and seat reservation at a travel agent's in Frankfurt, the only such entity in all of mainland Europe that boasts the status of General Sales Agent for Indian Railways. If I am to get where I have to get on time, it now has to be an internal flight to Hyderabad, which will set me down just under 150 kilometres short of my destination. Fortunately there is a seat available at a little over 6000 rupees on a Jet Airways plane, departing in a couple of hours. I have to change to the national airport, but there is time. Ten minutes later, after running the gauntlet of touts and hangers-on outside the exit doors, I am safely stowed with my cases inside the airport shuttle bus. Tentative fingers of dawn light up the streets as the bus rattles its way to Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport Terminal I, as the national airport is now confusingly called: Santa Cruz, the old Portuguese name, was much simpler. The journey takes about twenty minutes, as the two airports are the same only in name. Even at this early hour the outer-suburban streets are full to overflowing with people, auto-rickshaws and motor vehicles, but it is still too dark to take in much, always excepting the rainbow-gaudy Hindi-film posters that loom up in endless

sequence by the roadside. I have to stand, but take all in my stride: I am enormously relieved just to be here.

The security checks for the internal flight are harsh. They could have been worse still: a draconian notice outside at the check-in announces: 'PASSENGERS TO REMOVE BATTERIES FROM ALL MOBILE PHONES'. I ask if this is really true: a guard tells me the rule is not being applied. This concession to leniency does not prevent them from searching my hand luggage three separate times. They confiscate a set of spare AA batteries, but, mercifully, leave my cellphone and pocket organiser untouched. After this, the flight itself comes as a welcome anticlimax. Jet Airways is a recently-created private company, but, like all Indian air carriers, is subject to strict national legislation. The in-flight leaflet tells me that alcohol and tobacco are banned on all internal flights; so are both beef and pork. I read on and discover that no hand luggage is allowed on flights originating in Kashmir. At that point I look out of the window: we have just left Bombay behind and are now overflying the Deccan plateau. The terrain is dry, rocky, all but uninhabited. I turn to the complimentary airline magazine, from which I learn that the art of paper-making came to India from China and that all four Harry Potter books are featured in this month's best-selling English-language fiction chart. The hostess asks if I prefer 'veg or non-veg': I choose 'veg' and am rewarded with a superbly pungent mini-portion of chickpea masala and an aromatic samosa. It is almost invariably a pleasure to eat Indian food in India, and this excellent first snack is no exception. At some point we cross the state border between Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, and after just over an hour's flight, we land in Hyderabad.

The airport is small and easily negotiable. I phone my host in Warangal, and he suggests I book into a hotel room for a few hours and then try to arrange a car and driver to take me the rest of the way. Like that I should arrive only a few hours behind schedule, and the lectures can proceed as planned. I go to the hotel reservation desk and book into the Tulip Manohar. The hotel promptly sends a driver to the airport and in five minutes we are there. The doorman is resplendent in a turban and a bright green trouser-suit: I presume this is traditional Muslim garb, perhaps a throwback to the Raj-era court of the Nizam of Hyderabad. I am offered a special, short-stay daytime rate. It proves to be an enormously comfortable establishment, with plush armchairs that I can collapse into: here at least I can recover properly from the overbooking ordeal. In the room I discover that if I pull out the TV plug my cellphone charger will actually work: if this is the rule, I won't have to stint on phonecalls for fear of running out of charge. In the hotel restaurant, the buffet lunch is a veritable bouquet of highly spiced dishes, and their South Indian ultra-aromatic quality comes as an added bonus. An extra-strong preparation of diced beetroot, its main ingredient contriving to look and taste remarkably like ginger, provides exactly the stimulus craved by my metabolism. A bottle of Kingfisher beer provides the perfect accompaniment: this is a Permit Hotel, and none of the other diners appear likely to object to their fellow-guest's indulgence - which, in any case, I offset at the end with a call for 'chai'. A satisfyingly sweet, milky pot of tea duly materialises, and as I sip I leaf through today's copies of 'The Hindu' and 'The Times of India'. The selection of newspapers runs to seven or eight, all Indian and all English-language: nothing in the local language, Telugu, and nothing either in Hindi or Urdu, the two other languages widely known in the state. I am the only foreigner in the dining-room: the lunchtime clientele, mostly families, are obviously well-heeled: all appear to be Hindu, although Hyderabad is famous for having one of the highest concentrations of Muslims in India. It is also said to be a city that combines venerable tradition with hi-tech modernity: this hotel, spotlessly clean with excellent services, is certainly no mean advertisement for the modern end.

At the hotel travel desk I book a prepaid car and driver for the journey to Warangal. The driver speaks no English, but I am assured that the fare is the fare and there will be no haggling at the end. I embark in the vehicle and, fresh from the haven of the hotel, begin the discovery of Andhra Pradesh. We are almost immediately out of Hyderabad, and head north-east and on to the Warangal highway. The journey takes two and a half hours, all in a single straight line. The two sides of the road are a perfect example of ribbon development, lined almost continuously with shops, businesses and educational establishments. Nearly all the shopfronts have gaudily painted, bilingual signs, in English and in the cursive Telugu script. Hindi and its Devanagari script are nowhere to be seen. One evocative name follows another: 'Hyderabad Institute of Fashion Technology', 'National Centre for Jute Diversification', 'Chakra Bar and Restaurant', 'Hanuman Ladies Clothing', 'Natty Looks Ladies Advanced Beauty Parlour', 'Sri Sri Divya Steel and Cement Traders', and even 'Krishna Wines'. Fruit-stalls display gleaming oranges, bananas, and abundant bunches of grapes. Outside a dusty shrine to Durga, a man whips a bullock; the bright-yellow goddess looks on, impassive. Cows, goats, dogs, hogs and chickens, and, at one point, a small colony of monkeys, weave their nonchalant path among the vehicles and pedestrians. In the fields, grey-black buffaloes graze as small white birds carry out pest control activities, discreetly perched on the beasts' haunches. I seem to recall reading about this in an old National Geographic, years ago, as a textbook case of symbiosis in the animal kingdom. Finally, the car comes to a halt at the Punnami Hotel, next to the Regional Engineering College at Kazipet. My host, Dr M. Rajeshwar, is there to greet me. There is no recognition problem: we have already met in the material world, at a conference on globalisation held in Vigo (Spain) a few months earlier. I am delighted to see him, and equally pleased to register that despite everything I am only about eight hours late.

*Monday, 11 February (evening), Tuesday, 12 February and Wednesday, 13 February*

Warangal is a conurbation of 800 000 souls made up of three settlements - Kazipet, Hanamkonda and Warangal proper - strung out along the highway I arrived on, and merging indistinguishably into each other: there is no obviously identifiable town centre. My days there similarly merge one into the other, and I shall not try to separate them. Few foreigners make it to this part of Andhra Pradesh, though one of the first was also surely the most famous: Marco Polo, who, if his 'Travels' are to be believed, visited India as well as China, and was a guest in the Kakatiya kingdom towards the end of the thirteenth century, when Warangal was at the height of its glory as that enlightened dynasty's capital. Today, the most likely avatar of a foreigner in these regions here is no longer a Venetian adventurer but a guest lecturer at the university. While I am here I have the company of one fellow visitor from afar, and, curiously, he too is Italian - Dr Alessandro Monti, a professor from Turin.

The Punnami Hotel is state-owned: to be precise, the property of the Andhra Pradesh state government. My room is air-conditioned and plain but decent; the door closes with a padlock. The bar serves a discreet beer, but breakfast is decidedly on the slow side. Despite the multiple promises on the menu, each day there is only one choice to accompany the morning coffee and newspaper. It is masala dosa, a vegetable-stuffed pancake served with a fiery courgette-and-lentil condiment; it never takes less than half an hour to arrive. I read the 'Deccan Chronicle' each morning. On 13 February I learn that the Vishwa Hindu Parishad organisation is arranging nationwide protests against the alien Western custom of St Valentine's Day. The main news item from outside the subcontinent is Tony Blair's use of his influence to procure an up-for-sale Romanian steelworks for a Labour-friendly Indian millionaire. One morning in the hotel grounds, as I await my host, a small, ageing gentleman

comes up to me and begins a conversation. He tells me he is a musician. Dr Rajeshwar arrives, and thanks to his interpretation I discover that the man is a ghazal singer. He offers us an impromptu performance, there and then on the lawn. The ghazal is his own composition, in Urdu.

Over these days I give three lectures at the Arts Faculty of Kakatiya University. The university was founded 25 years ago and has 67,000 undergraduates and 5,000 postgraduates. My host picks me up in his car at the hotel each morning and drives me through modern streets - lined with efficient-looking public buildings, glittering sari shops, xerox outlets and brand-new cybercafés, but still patronised as ever by patiently ambling goats, buffaloes and cows. Yellow-and-black auto-rickshaws buzz wasplike among the cars, trucks, motorbikes, bicycles, pedestrians and various fauna, but I notice the absence of cycle-rickshaws. Only here and there does a cyclist pull a load of firewood or rice-sacks behind him. Dr Rajeshwar explains that the cycle-rickshaw is dying out as a means of transporting people and is now used only for goods. I am intrigued by a large, shed-like building, festooned in broad daylight with rainbow fairy-lights, and am told it is a public hall for the conduct of weddings. The weather is warm and sunny, without being sticky or oppressive.

The university campus is self-contained, and the buildings solid. The English Department occupies part of the upper floor of the three-storey Humanities Building. The lecture-rooms and offices are aligned on a long corridor with a balcony facing a scrubby garden. My lecture topics, as agreed beforehand with the Head of Department and approved by the Dean, are: 'The Question of Standard English'; 'Aspects of Language in Vikram Seth's Novel "A Suitable Boy"'; and 'Walter Benjamin, the Paris Arcades and Cultural Debates in the West'. The amphitheatre is small, seating about 60 people: I have a mixed audience of staff and students. There is a parting in the middle: the women sit on the left side and the men on the right, but there is no other segregation. The lectures are, beyond any doubt, a success. The Professor of English Language, Dr Gurrapu Damodar, tells me my text on Standard English is of great interest for their language programme (I argue, against the pseudo-progressives in the West, that Standard English both does and should exist). The Seth lecture has the interest of offering a European perspective on a book that has been a huge seller in India. The Benjamin paper may be slightly above the heads of some of the students, but elicits a very lively response from the staff; my comments on Benjamin's concept of time stimulate a discussion contrasting the Judeo-Christian and Indian notions of time and history. Professor Monti makes lively and humorous contributions to all the debates. Between and after the lectures, I carry on the conversation with staff and postgraduates, over tea in the Head of Department's office. It is strange yet moving to meet scholars who may never have been out of India, yet have an intimate knowledge of the poetry of Robert Frost or Philip Larkin. A particularly friendly and helpful postgraduate student named Aravind is delighted when I bring him, as promised from afar, copies of two books by the South African-Botswanan writer Bessie Head, on whom he would like to write his thesis but whose works are virtually unobtainable in India. All in all I am most impressed by the intellectual calibre of the people in this Department - by the quality of their scholarship, and also their keenness, enthusiasm and visible devotion to learning.

On the last morning I am invited to meet the Vice-Chancellor of the University. He serves his guests tea under a large photograph of Indira Gandhi. He is a pharmacist and pharmaceutical adviser to the Indian government; one of his chief interests is the patenting of herbal medicines. I talk to him about the continued strength of ayurvedic medicine in modern India. That evening, I am invited to talk on the radio; the invitation is courtesy of Professor Damodar, who works with the local station of All-India Radio. A woman postgraduate from

the university interviews me on the subject of Standard English. I give answers based on my lecture, and add that in my view an Indian form of Standard English does exist, and is by now most certainly developed enough to be a genuine alternative to British and American English, at both subcontinental and world level. The tape will be edited into final shape and will be broadcast two Sundays later, to as many as 300 000 listeners, as part of an ongoing series of talks on aspects of language. The interviewer asks me if I am interested in the arts, and I discover that she has a second self apart from her studies, as a reputed Bharata Natyam dancer.

Meals over these days consist of lunch in the Head of Department's office, home-cooked and sent in, and dinner in one or other of the best local restaurants. All is of uniformly high quality. In the restaurants, Dr Rajeshwar is careful to order, for both me and his Italian guest, 'minimum spicy', which corresponds to 'very spicy' in the West. What I get is consistently at just the right degree of spiciness for my palate. I particularly appreciate the restaurant palak paneer - Indian cottage cheese cooked with spinach - and the home-made lime chutney. The food is washed down with beer in the Permit restaurant and tea in the non-Permit restaurant. Over one of the dinners I learn that educated Hindu families tend these days to have only one or two children, on whom they lavish all the educational resources they can. Professor Monti confirms that a similar situation exists today in Italy. PC and cellphone ownership are now commonplace in middle-class South Indian families, I am told, and many have a member studying or working in the US, most likely in the IT field. All the members of the academic community whom I meet are most visibly secular and tolerant people. The postgraduate student, in particular, several times condemns the manipulation of religion - any religion - for political ends. Warangal comes over as a quiet and decent place where people get on with their business and significant academic research is done.

The tourist programme comprises Warangal Fort and the Temple of a Thousand Pillars. Both were built under the Hindu Kakatiya dynasty, which ruled over a great swathe of south India in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Historians have concluded that they had advanced mathematical and astronomical knowledge - lost, alas, when the Muslims of the Delhi Sultanate invaded their kingdom and all but destroyed their temples. I am driven by my host one afternoon, with my Italian fellow guest and the postgraduate student Aravind, to the Warangal fort. It is on the edge of town. On the way we pass through a less-than-prosperous village. Untouched by nuclear physics or the Internet, the men sit on their doorsteps and stare blankly into the street. Stray motorcycles and auto-rickshaws stir up the dust. Women, sari-clad Hindus and black-shrouded Muslims alike, labour in the fields. The main ruins consist of an expanse of fractured masonry flanked by four huge, elegantly pillared gates. They once marked the boundaries of the fort's temple complex. For long centuries they lay buried in the mud, hidden under a mound heaped on the site by the Muslims. Both extremities of the best-preserved gate are surmounted by strange eagle-like bird-forms. The gates seem almost Hellenistic in style, and the whole complex reminds me strangely of the Roman ruins of Cimiez, in Nice. An Archaeological Survey of India plaque bears witness to Marco Polo's visit to the Kakatiya kingdom. Beyond the gates, a large, still lake spreads out its melancholy waters. The student points out the cranes nesting on an island in mid-lake, and shares with me how the scene, with its natural beauty that turns to contemplation, reminds him of Wordsworth. On the other side of the lake, looming up rugged and austere, is the One Rock that gives the city its name: the old appellation, Ekashilanagaram, or Single-Stone-City, is said to have mutated over the years into Warangal. The landscape is empty, almost deserted. As we return to the car, a ragged goatherd passes by with his fifty-strong entourage - mostly coal-black, a few deep brown. The emaciated herdsman holds down two frisky kids in his

arms, and gazes impassively as his ancestor must have gazed under the Kakatiyas. Twilight is falling; we head back into town.

The next morning, the student Aravind accompanies me to the Temple of a Thousand Pillars. It is in town, to be precise in Hanamkonda. I learn that the name Hanamkonda means the hill of the monkey-god Hanuman, and, sure enough, a group of chattering simians greets us raucously as we enter the temple precinct. A lone sadhu with long matted hair leans on his staff outside the door. He is the only holy man in sight. The forecourt is graced by a polished basalt statue of a harnessed bull or Nandi, emblem of Shiva, and the miniature figure of an elephant, long-trunked but turned tuskless by time. But the real power of this temple complex lies in the extraordinary pillars which give its name. I examine them from all angles and take a dozen photos. The pillars, carved in granite, are grey, thin and angular; they are made up of a succession of geometrical forms - cubes, lozenges, saucer-like ovals, and strange helmet-like shapes with a double eye-like slit at each side. The mathematical precision of these shapes is remarkable, and endlessly multiplied. My companion explains that in its heyday the temple had not the one storey that it now has, but seven, each one smaller than the one under it, so that the whole structure tapered up to the skies like a Babylonian ziggurat, or the Tower of Babel as dreamed forth by Brueghel. The invading Muslims destroyed all but the lowest level, but the original, seven-storeyed ziggurat plan is figured to this day, as a compositional element, on many of the surviving pillars. The seventh level housed an observatory, from which the Kakatiyas' wise men communed with the stars. I am filled with the remembrance of times past and the sense of knowledge lost. Outside the temple, we hail an auto-rickshaw, and the jolting ride returns us to the university and the twenty-first century.

*Thursday, 14 February*

After breakfast I check out of the Punnam Hotel, proffer all my grateful thanks to Dr Rajeshwar, and load my luggage in the hired taxi that is to return me to Hyderabad. I have contracted the services of the same driver for all the time I will be in Hyderabad, that is, all of today and tomorrow up to my evening train. He is literate in Telugu but speaks almost no English beyond 'left', 'right' and 'wait'; whenever I need to communicate with him we have to stop someone educated-looking in the street and ask them to interpret. This method, fortunately, always works. The vehicle, a large white Ambassador, takes me back up to Hyderabad by the same ribbon route that brought me down. The driver plays tapes of Telugu film music all the way. By midday we have arrived safely at my destination, the leafy campus of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, or CIEFL.

CIEFL's Guest House, where I am to be put up, occupies the same building as the refectory. I check into Room No 7. The furnishings are dark, decent, a little faded. I call up Dr Venkat Rao, the professor who will act as my host here, on the internal phone; he comes to meet me immediately, and offers me lunch in the room. The institutional fare is plain but palatable: chicken masala, dhal and rice, enlivened by a bright-yellow, mustard-sharp, typically South Indian mango paste. Dr Venkat Rao confirms my lecture for 11 the next morning; it is to be a repeat of the paper on Benjamin I have just given in Warangal. He says he will be intrigued to hear my exposition of how Benjamin's theory of relationship anticipates the logic of the Internet. CIEFL, he explains, teaches languages and cultural theory across a range taking in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Arabic. He takes me to his office and introduces me to a colleague who is working on a project for 'Dedicated Software for the Visually Impaired'. I question him on Hyderabad's growing fame as a world-class centre for science and IT. He says that, hard on the heels of the existing Silicon Valley here in the

Deccan, a Genomics Valley too is in the offing, and recommends a visit to the out-of-town software park known as Hi-Tec City or Cyberabad. I thank him for the advice, and we part for the day.

I ask the driver to take me into town. I have three destinations in mind, which will occupy the whole afternoon between them, as Hyderabad is huge: it is India's fifth biggest city, and it feels it. First and with some difficulty, I have to track down the local office of Delta Air Lines, on Raj Bhavan Road. I reconfirm my return ticket and ask if I can use my compensation voucher to upgrade from economy to business. The woman clerk tells me it should be possible at Bombay airport, but I will probably have to pay another 200 dollars on top of the value of the voucher. Not entirely delighted by this news, I switch my attention to more interesting things and ask the driver to take me to Walden's, the bookshop that has been recommended to me. The driver, who hails from Warangal and is not terribly well acquainted with Hyderabad's topographical minutiae, parks next to the 'Times of India' building opposite the statue of Rajiv Gandhi. It is a modern quarter of concrete blocks and solid, European-style shops. I sally out on foot to locate the bookshop, weaving my way through crowded streets with endless auto-rickshaws and motorbikes swooping out anywhere and everywhere. Walden's proves to be a labyrinth; the books, especially in the literature section, are for the most part stacked horizontally down to the floor, in no particular order. I investigate a raft of Penguin India titles, mostly unobtainable outside the subcontinent, and choose a couple, noting on the way that R.K. Narayan and P.G. Wodehouse seem, as ever, to be the two most popular fiction writers, and that Harry Potter has, as expected, woven his magic across the children's section. In the music department I ask for Telugu recordings, and am directed to two cassettes, one a religious recording of bhajans and the other a selection of 'filmi' tunes, both of which I promptly buy.

The driver has shifted the car in my absence to an obscure side street, and it takes fifteen minutes to track him down. I ask him to head for Hi-Tec City. On the way I consult a tourist leaflet and discover that Hi-Tec is an acronym for Hyderabad Information Technology and Engineering Consultancy. We pass through a residential district of colonial villas, finally entering a plateau echoing with the din of construction sites. On both sides of a dust-covered highway, the dark-red soil is fast disappearing under a flurry of building activity that unexpectedly recalls the Frankfurt I left a few days ago. We come to a halt outside a gleamingly spotless, ten-storey glass-and-steel edifice proudly displaying the name Cyber Towers. I ask the security guard if I can visit the building. He demands my credentials, makes a phonecall to his superior, and informs me that I am authorised to enter, provided I confine myself to the ground floor and agree to be accompanied by him throughout. He explains that the security arrangements have been stepped up in the wake of 11 September, and warns me that photography is strictly prohibited on the premises.

Inside the monster's maw, the guard ushers me to a large 3-D mock-up of the Hi-Tec City project, of which Cyber Towers is but a part. The whole thing is clearly planned to expand to far larger than its present size: the site covers all of 60 hectares. A plaque declares that the building was opened in 1998, by Prime Minister Vajpayee in person. I ask the guard what was there before, and he replies: 'Mud'. A whole wall is taken up with the glittering names of the software firms housed inside the glass palace. I take in such familiar names as the US company Oracle and the Indian undertaking Infosys - and then, suddenly, realise that the entire fourth floor is occupied by the premises of a certain Microsoft. The guard explains that those offices house the first software development centre to be created by William Gates III outside his home country. The whole security thing now somehow seems to fall into place. I

feel the need to sit down and drink some tea. The guard vouchsafes me permission to enter the restaurant for a few minutes, and soon after I am safely out of Cyber Towers and heading back, away from the Microsoft empire and towards the more manageable campus world of CIEFL. I arrive at 7.30, just after the refectory has closed. The warden kindly sends someone out to bring me a takeaway dinner. I dine copiously on vegetable biryani, and fall asleep in Room No 7 to the music of the air-conditioner fan.

*Friday, 15 February*

At 11 a.m. I am in a seminar room in the presence of a select audience consisting of a dozen assembled Heads of Department. Dr Venkat Rao introduces me and says I am here to address his faculty on 'one of the great German philosophers'. The lecture unfolds, voyaging across time from the Europe of the 1940s all the way to the Internet, and I know I am holding the attention of all. By way of illustration I pass round a set of photos of the Paris arcades. As Victor Hugo is mentioned in the lecture and as he was one of the first to predict a single currency for Europe, I also pass round a selection of euro coins, which arouse great interest. A lively debate follows; in answer to several questioners, I explain how Benjamin criticised the dominant Western concept of time, with its model of unquestioned linear progress. The conversation continues over lunch in the refectory, and it is clear that my comments on the non-linear nature of the Internet have struck a sympathetic chord among my Indian listeners. Here as in Warangal, the advanced intellectual level of the debate has been extremely gratifying.

Just one afternoon is left in Andhra, up till my train back to Bombay, which leaves Hyderabad station at 8.40 p.m. As I still have souvenir-hunting to do and would like a contrast from Microsoft, I ask the driver to take me into the old town and leave me there for two hours. On the way, we pass a gigantic demonstration of taxi-drivers. We stop at the Charminar. This gateway with four minarets (the name means Four Towers), built in 1591, is the symbol of the city and the open-sesame gate to the Laad Bazaar. The Bazaar consists of the two sides of a long street, lined with shops, plus the side alleyways where the artisans work. Just beyond the Charminar is the Mecca Masjid, a huge mosque said to include bricks brought from Mecca, but there I do not venture. That seems hardly necessary: on the streets of the old city, the presence of Islam is palpable.

Estimates of Hyderabad's Muslim population vary from 30 to 50%, but here in the old town it certainly seems like half. In the days of the Raj and the Nizam, I have been told, the city was 80% Muslim. On the thronged streets of the Bazaar, Hindus and Muslims mingle cheek-by-jowl, the multicoloured saris of the Hindu women sparkling in uncanny contrast to their Muslim sisters' uniform black. The Muslim women wear head-to-foot burqas and headscarves; their faces are mostly visible, their eyes always. The two faiths are obviously buying from each other's shops, but how far intercommunal contact goes beyond that I have no way of telling. With its idiosyncratic signs and gleaming wares - pearls, silk, silverware, cutlery, fruit, vegetables - the Bazaar is a vast blaze of colour. At the emporium of Krishna Industries and Jewellers I buy two pearl necklaces; the vendor assures me the pearls are 'guaranteed freshwater'. Across the street I enter an artisans' courtyard, buy tea boiled over an open fire for two rupees, and choose half-a-dozen finely-wrought silver pillboxes. My purchases duly made, I photograph a selection of wares and signboards: 'S.D. Sigmodia College of Arts & Commerce - Bachelor of Computer Applications'; 'Yousufain Bazar Wedding Suits & Sarees'; 'Magdaum Kurta Pyjamas and Kids Wear'; 'N.L. Aluminium & Plastic Standard Steel'; and 'Sagar Chat Bhandar and Vegetarian [sic] Hotel' (this latter's

Indianness is somewhat qualified by the proximity of an 'Enjoy Coca-Cola' slogan beside the sign). Here too, most signs are in English and Telugu. Muslim bookshops and clothing establishments announce themselves in the Arabic characters of Urdu, but Hindi is, once again, nowhere to be seen. I enter a stationer's in search of picture postcards. There are St Valentine's Day cards aplenty, one day late, but no views of Hyderabad. I linger in the shop, as a middle-aged man invites me in fluent English to a cup of tea. He turns out to be a relative of the owners, who lives in Watford, England. He is a retired engineer; he owns a house in Watford but flees the English cold each winter for Hyderabad. He informs me that at one of the local universities a private company from the UK is busy giving young Indian teachers of English induction training in British culture; after that they will be shipped into state schools in Britain to help fill that country's national teacher shortage. I thank my informant for his hospitality and head back to the Charminar. In an alley near the monument a lone brown cow strolls reflectively; I devote the last snapshot on my roll to the fortunate animal, and return to the car.

Back on campus, I have time to refresh myself with a plateful of egg bhajis before leaving for the station. At my request, my host has found an English-speaker, in the person of Hafiz, the warden of the Guest House, to help me negotiate the mysteries of Indian Railways. I say goodbye to the driver at the station forecourt, and proceed with the warden. A notice outside the station promises 'Special Facilities for the Physically Challenged'. The clerk at the ticket desk confirms the reservation I had made in Germany, and, sure enough, when the Hyderabad-Mumbai express arrives my name is there alongside all the others, on a sheet plastered on the outside of the Two Tier Air Conditioned compartment. The benefits of globalisation cannot be denied. Hafiz helps me on to the train with my luggage; I thank him for his kindness and efficiency, and the journey out begins.

*Saturday, 16 and Sunday, 17 February*

The train is on time, and at 1.35 p.m. I am in Bombay-Mumbai, at the Raj-era station which used to be called Victoria Terminus and has now been renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus, after the same historical figure as the airport. A red-uniformed porter clambers on to the train, and hoists my case on to his broad shoulders without even asking me. I pay him off well before the forecourt, as I want to pick a taxi myself. A driver approaches me proposing 450 rupees to the international airport: he looks honest, but I check the fare with a traffic policeman before accepting. The driver ties my case to the roof and loops it around with three strands of plastic twine. He is an educated man, a Hindu from the port city of Surat in Gujarat. On his windscreen, an illuminated, orange plastic figure of the elephant-headed god Ganesha gleams for good luck. On the way he explains that the taxi-drivers' protest I had witnessed yesterday was against a central government diktat obliging them to burn more expensive fuel. He is not in favour of the official name-change to Mumbai in all languages, even if Bombay was known as Mumbai anyway in his own Gujarati tongue: he thinks cosmetic changes of this kind waste time and money and benefit no-one but the politicians. As we pass through the slum quarters that line the airport road, he tells me he believes India can become a great power if it can resolve the twin scourges of overpopulation and illiteracy: it has everything else. He is curious and well-informed about the euro, and thinks the 500 euro note is not a good idea: it will only encourage the black market. These thoughts take us up to Departure Terminal 2A, and there we part.

I spend a drawn-out afternoon and evening at the airport. Delta Air Lines finally tell me that if I want to upgrade to business I will have to top my voucher up not with 200 but with 750

dollars. As the voucher turns out to cover only half the cost of upgrading, I decide it is not worth the candle, and stick to economy. The flight before mine is to Dubai: a notice at the check-in gate warns travellers to refrain from boarding with firearms or spears. When my time comes just before 2 a.m., Delta kindly allow me to board without incident. For the next nine hours I compensate for a mediocre flight experience, complete with bland refreshments and announcements in the flattest CNN accents, by mentally retracing my steps in India and reliving all the remarkable moments. Soon after 7 a.m. European time, the plane touches down at Frankfurt and returns me to the point of departure - to that real or imaginary place known to Marco Polo's time as Christendom, and to us today as 'the West'.