

## VIDESHI-DESI<sup>1</sup>: INDIA AND INGESTION IN EXPATRIATE WRITING

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If an abiding desire to enrich dietary palates was one of the founts of European colonialism, and in this curious fashion an accidental catalyst of Enlightenment and Modernity, then the contemporary Occidental's eagerness to be gastronomically immersed in the vivid diversity of the Orient is perhaps a mark of his/her enduring fantasy to conquer the unknown other. Of course, the fact that such gastric engagements are consciously mediated and sought for, and are not scripted performances in dominance, negates, by virtue of the many attendant fusions, whatever little surface validity Occidental and Oriental may hold, but the resultant hybridity in its transcendence of the limitations of categories and their cognitions does not obscure its foundational constituents.

Thus, in referring to the white (wo)man's dietary adventures in spaces beyond the pale of the known everyday, one alludes to the confluence of the supposed Occidental's local – which, with increasing globalisation, has assumed an auratic globality – with strains of supposed Oriental authenticities ingested as sensory experiences, and the presence therein of the impulse to digestively articulate into the known the vast uncharted realms of smells, sights and sounds surrounding the focal referential of the expressive unitary self. While this ingestive impulse is no more Occidental as it is Oriental, embedded within the supposed Occidental's global-local's experiential feeding into the other appear hints of that old metaphor of consumptive conquering, of articulating a world into order by feeling through the tangible and the tactile; that these articulations acquire an expository idiom of amazement, and are realised as fragments, is then all the more remarkable for the continued perpetuation of other-hood, and not difference, upon that which is felt and lived through.

Narrowing to the urban spaces of the Indian subcontinent, it is this idiomatic wonder which this paper interests itself with, for the chromatism with which these spaces are perceived and felt as India results in a globalisation of the microscopes of those lived experiences. Hence, besides obvious considerations of work, cuisine and the sensations around, of and from it inform the contours of expatriate engagements with India, imploding the global-local into the local in a way which creates an India of, again, smells, sights and sounds which can only be understood in terms of wonder which discovers and establishes. Accordingly, this paper will study these motifs in contemporary expatriate writings, referring to Dave Prager's *Delirious Delhi: Inside India's Incredible Capital* and blogs like Sharell Cook's *Diary of a White Indian Housewife* and Jeanne Heydecker's *An American in Delhi* and *An American in Calcutta* to find in the repeated reference to gastric experiences and to a continued sense of incredibility a reconfiguration of pre-existing tropes of reductive exoticisation which

globalises the local Indian through the gastric performativity of the global-local self particularised through continued exposure into an apparently seamless hybridity of palates dietary and otherwise.

That the instituting of a self, both particular and communal, requires sets of value-systems which demarcate others, and that in this process the multiplicities which inescapably constitute all selves are often ossified as a unitary whole are considerations too well known to require any detailed explication. At every stage in human history individuals and communities have brought into being notions of what they are on that Saussurean basis of not being what the other is, the otherness of this other becoming more defined with increase in the perceived distance from the self enforced into being. Thus, all categories being more or less quibbles upon empirical data, the shoring up of values and birthing differences so as to achieve and maintain politico-economic aims and states of being, one cannot but nuance Occidental and Oriental in a fashion which makes apparent the constitutive derivatives which make them as enduring as they are. Of course, the geo-spatial myths of West and East, the reductive build-up of human cultures and communities as corollaries of the quarters consigned to them in value-laden cartograms, is not wholly exclusive to European Early Modernity, but the extents to which this last institutionalised its understanding of the earth as a globe, and the unprecedentedly far-reaching consequences of the same, is what stands as noteworthy in the history of ego-centric cognition and mapping.

Indeed, for it is this mapping which provided for the perspectives with which Europe<sup>2</sup>, defensively shored against its own vulnerabilities as the West, could view all others as incomprehensibly different, and so in need of the cognitive self-consciousness with which it believed itself to know what it was, and could be. This apparent lack in the other, as Humanism slid into the ports of Western Europe and as Modernity took birth in counting houses, warehouses and plantations, was perceived, more often than not, as a series of sensory experiences, given definitive shape as and through keen and vicarious observation. Be it in Africa, America, Asia or Australia, Europe engaged first through its senses, seeing what it expected to see<sup>3</sup>, what it thought it would – and, then, should – see, and then enforced the devices of its own socio-scientific vocabulary in order to define into being what it felt it saw, premising in this way the existence of entire communities and cultures on what it saw and felt to be<sup>4</sup>. With this chromatic empiricism as the fount of knowledge, it is not in the least surprising that the ingestive faculties of the body – seeing, hearing; sensing – were considered integral to the conquering, and supposed ordering, of the unknown: the only way the other, the unknown, could be known was to consume it.

Both the Enlightenment and Modernity, and their underlying engines, mercantile colonialism and industrial imperialism, were in some ways founded upon this praxis of consumption; the consumption of resources and the production of knowledge, that which is perceived to be knowledge, axiomatically resulting, then, in the truth of the global West, the truth of rationally thought out near-ostensible abstractions, techniques and systems which idiomatically render all others local as against the globality of these abstractions. Hence, with truth ossified as a universal abstract, and knowledge based more or less upon observed data, the birth pangs of empiricism necessitated an aggressive and acquisitive hunger for and

against the other which still continues to guide the self-consciously Occidental's interactions with the other. This is, of course, not to suggest that the old mores of top-down ingestion continue to wholly guide these interactions; instead, it is to suggest that with deeply engrained cultural memories of the other being essentially chaotic, sensual and sensory as opposed to the rationally ordered and sanitised self, and with global tourism investing heavily in prolonging the shelf-life of stereotypes, most Occidental engagements with the Orient remain informed by the former's expectation of the latter being a space to be understood as a place through the illuminating exercise of consumption.

Within this matrix of consumption, what interests this paper is the fusion of the carriers of this Occidental globality with the Oriental local, for if perception is a factor of ingestion, of seeing, feeling and mapping, then the perceptual apparatuses of the global as local involve both feeding into the stereotypes of the local, and, as the global fuses into the local, layering, digestively, the local as series of multiplicities in and across space and time. This is characteristic of much of expatriate writing emerging from the urban centres of the Indian subcontinent, a relatively new genre whose revelatory, self-confessional mode underlies the global's coming to terms with the other progressively interred within his/her self. The engendering of this near-hybridity, and coming to terms with that, is one of the central motifs of Dave Prager's *Delirious Delhi: Inside India's Incredible Capital*, an anecdotal novel on Prager and his wife Jenny's experiences of and in Delhi during their eighteen month stay in India. *Delirious Delhi* is remarkable for its title, juxtaposing 'Incredible India', the self-consciously exoticising motto of the Union Government's tourism campaign, with 'delirious' to produce an effect of maddening wonderment, a confusion inducing chaos which endears by virtue of being incredible for precisely that reason. This theme of mystery and multiplicities is further underscored by the epigraph on India<sup>6</sup> from Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and by the title of the first chapter, 'The First Morning and Other Mysteries', obvious implication being that the first morning, and everything else, cannot be anything but a mystery which with only time and effort can be unravelled. Indeed, as the first chapter demonstrates, this last is all too clearly the case, beginning as it does with the curiosity-whetting play on paella – "We knew we would love living in Delhi the moment we heard the door-to-door paella salesman" (Prager 1) – and concluding with the acknowledgement that only to their "wistful Western ears did it [*kabarhi*] sound like a Mediterranean delight" (Prager 29): expecting the unexpected, Prager and spouse could not but perceive the unexpected.

If the first chapter underlies the element of mystery, the second firmly puts in place that of revelatory adventure: titled 'Delhi: The Sprawled City', it begins with an anecdote of Prager getting lost in the neighbourhood of his rented apartment in Greater Kailash – II on the first day of his arrival in India<sup>7</sup>, goes on to descriptively narrate<sup>8</sup> some of the Pragers' exploratory forays into different parts and areas of Delhi<sup>9</sup>, and concludes with a quintessential pronouncement, a meta-truth of sorts, on the city, that it is not one but as many as there are people in it<sup>10</sup> – "Delhi exists in a kind of quantum state: in Delhi, all things are true at once" (Prager 59). The thematic structure of this chapter makes clear the tenor of the text: Delhi, and by possible extension India, is a space of strange, bewildering, more or less sensory

contraries which, unlike the settled, ordered homelands of the West, can never be fully comprehended by Western eyes, leaving the expatriate no choice but to morph into a hybrid of varying degrees of hybridity as endeavours at comprehension immerse him/her deeper into the layers that the other inevitably is composed of.

While as much is apparent in Prager's delineation in the chapter 'Expat Issues: We'll Complain Anyway' of the "three phases of awareness in Delhi" (Prager 357) which he and his wife went through – the first being with "gape-mouthed" (Prager 357) amazement; the second wherein even as "what had been shockingly foreign became comfortably mundane" (Prager 358) "greater context actually meant less comprehension" (Prager 361); and the third of nostalgia "for the stuff that had terrified us in the first phase" (Prager 362) – , what makes this increasing hybridity possible is not as much work as the will to experience, and, in experiencing, know. This is illustrated best in the chapter 'The Food: Oh My God, the Food', which, notwithstanding the subjectivities of culinary preference and the playful hyperbole of the opening line, "Jenny and I moved to India for the food" (Prager 129), underscores the centrality of literally consuming, eating away, the mysteries that the alien unknown is constituted by so as to come to a more comprehensive understanding<sup>11</sup>. Prager's first day in Delhi begins with getting lost, but eventually winding up in Nathu's to a "delightful meal" (Prager 31); the more he engages with the city, the greater is the range and depth of his culinary experiences: from home-cooked food prepared by the Pragers' cook Ganga to international cuisine in upmarket "restaurants with names like 'Diva' and 'Nûdeli'" (Prager 47); from kulfi falooda at Roshan Di Kulfi in Karol Bagh to mutton kebabs at Karim's in Old Delhi, the Pragers' interactions with the city, and with the cultures embodied within its different places, outside work seem more or less based upon a consumptive desire to feed their way into knowledge of the spaces they perceive around them. Consider, for instance, these words on the Jama Masjid Karim's:

Karim's unmarked alley entrance means that one can never stumble upon Karim's. One has to be seeking it out. One has to be in the know. And this defines Karim's allure: the twisting alleys of the old City hold a million secrets the Western eye will never uncover, but to know about Karim's is to conquer at least one of them (Prager 164).

As elsewhere, the language here is richly evocative of mystery and the inherent capacity of the unknown to evade all attempts to "uncover" (Prager 164) its secrets. There are many legends surrounding the origins of Karim's, but to the Pragers "it never really mattered, because the mystique of Karim's was as satisfying as the food" (Prager 164); indeed, such is the inscrutability surrounding the quotidian that only with sustained inputs and help can the hybridising global-local – glocal – "get to the truth about" (Prager 165) food, and by extension the people, of Delhi: friends, colleagues, and, most importantly, the eatery-hopping group Eating Out in Delhi, EOID, combine to give the glocal the necessary wherewithal to vicariously experience the many hues of the local.

That this combination of the Pragers' "two favourite pastimes: eating and not spending much money" (Prager 166) in EOID integrally informed their consumptive unravelling of the city is made amply clear in the following homage to EOID:

On journeys with EOID, we tried methi chicken in a neighbourhood in which every other storefront was selling live chickens. We ate kebabs in the dhabas where Delhi University students hang out. We drank home-made lemon soda from a Chandni Chowk family that's been making it for generations. And we sampled Mallu food in a fine café so well hidden in a nondescript alley that we'd never noticed it before, even though it was within walking distance of our home (Prager 166).

That last is instructive: "even though it was within walking distance of our home" (Prager 166), the Pragers, stunned by the apparent supra-abundance of chaos around them, are more or less ineffectual in penetrating the otherness of the everyday without sustained guidance. In much the same way as the first European merchants and mercenaries perceived the other, the unknown, the Pragers too fail to see; or experience, as in the case of the "paellawallah" (Prager 29), what they expect to understand and see – a jumble of irreconcilable contraries, parallels and multiplicities with no one "overarching narrative" (Prager 59) at all.

Bafflement at the lack of such a narrative, and engagement with the other primarily as sensory experiences is not just a Prager quirk, for many expatriates, persons of white Caucasian descent – and thus in possession, by virtue of being white and Caucasian, of the cultural legacy of abstract universal truths – more than just 'Westerners', write about their experiences in India employing a vocabulary of amazement, consumption and revelation which goes beyond the tourist's desire to feel and know the exotic<sup>12</sup>. In the blogpost "Finding a Place to Live In Kolkata", written a month into her arrival in India as not a tourist but an expatriate aiming to settle in India for a long-term basis, Jeanne-Elise M. Heydecker is visibly struck by the "sensory overload" (Heydecker) of Calcutta:

The streets in Calcutta are on sensory overload. Everyone moves around one another – all driving here is based on a dare. Whomever is going faster or looks crazier has the right of way, plus you share the street with bullock carts, bicycles, cows, packs of wild dogs, lots and lots of people, buses, trucks, trams, hand rickshaws, bike rickshaws, motor rickshaws, motorcycles, mopeds, scooters, handpulled carts overloaded with goods going to market, construction materials, etc...and no one uses a lane (they're not even marked – I think they gave up on the notion), and no one heeds the traffic lights or the traffic cops. Drivers use their horns constantly. It's noisy, polluted, hot and sticky, and overall, a most unpleasant undertaking (Heydecker).

The inescapable, near irreconcilable otherness of the quotidian and the alterities embedded therein for the hybridising global are similarly expressed by Sharell Cook in blogposts such as "Can a Foreigner Feel at Home in India?" and "Is it Possible to Become Indian?"; in the latter, Cook writes of the difficulties of assimilating in a cultural milieu which is both alien and alienating:

First, there is the falling in love stage, where everything is interesting and wonderful. Then, there comes the criticisms. And, after that (hopefully) the acceptance. Yet, there's one crucial omission in this comparison: the longingness to belong...But



ultimately, the majority of people will look at me and treat me as a foreigner because they view me as one (although I, of course, view myself as white Indian)...So, foreigners like me eventually give up...We start eating what we want, dressing how we want, and doing what we want. If we're going to be viewed as a foreigner, we might as well behave like one! I've come to realise my white skin gives me certain power in India... (Cook)

The revelation for Cook here may be read as an extension of the metaphors employed by Prager, that given one's own foreignness, the otherness of one's own subjectivities, access to the other is limited to a crucial point – that against total assimilation, integration, only an increasingly layered hybridity is possible. What is crucially at stake here, though, is sight, perception, for in the fusion of the global with the local the emergent hybridity is attendant upon the dictates of performance and perception: to be an Indian, one must perform Indian-ness, even as in the inevitable necessity of the performativity of that Indian-ness lie embedded the roots of an apparently inerasable alterity, the foreignness of the hybridising global. Faced with these challenges, the glocal responds either by isolating him/herself from the rush of the inevitable surrounding him/her, or by developing a heightened awareness of the difference around him/her, and vicariously feeling in that as part of what India is:

Maybe it's because I was trained as an artist – I "see" things, even regarding common objects that most might not notice. The misspelled sign, the Sikh rewinding his turban, the paanwallah cross-legged in his lean-to booth...The woman in the slum carrying washed vegetables in a basket on her head while wearing all her jewelery...henna tattoos...women hiding their faces behind veils, men with bright red hair...suits and ties in August in Kolkata...the kites circling my building, cows transforming my street into a parking lot...stray packs of dogs...someone practicing their sitar...India sings to me in a way no other country ever has. Each round of a corner on "Asian Way" on the way into work in Kolkata was a discovery. Going to the liquor store or a cigarette walla is an adventure here. Of course it's also frustrating, slow and absolutely maddening, but India really couldn't be any other way, could it? (Heydecker)

Heydecker's developing perceptivity towards everything around her seems indicative of the growing normalisation the glocal experiences into the strange otherness of that everyday everything, an intensely keen, self-conscious awareness of the ordinary. Hence, even as images which shock morph into the normal, that normal, ordinary, continues being an extraordinary pastiche of otherness which colours engagement as an "adventure" (Heydecker), an adventure whose un-achievability necessitates, ironically, the performance of the otherness one wishes to comprehend, and comprehending conquer, ultimately subduing, ordering, "sensory bursts" (Prager) into the known, accessible vocabulary of knowledge and reason. It is in this, in endeavouring to achieve that which has been believed to be unachievable, that the hybridising glocal feeds into the exotic, consuming away the unknown as exotic and thus entrenching the perceptual apparatuses which pre-inform the stereotypes of the *videshi* in popular imagination.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This is deliberate: *desi*, not *deshi*.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is not to suggest any monolithic understanding of Europe.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Gabriel Garcia Márquez in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “It is only natural that they insist on measuring us with the yardstick that they use for themselves, forgetting that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the quest of our own identity is just as arduous and bloody for us as it was for them. The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary” (Marquez 184).

<sup>4</sup> This varies, as we know: in cases where it could, it did so; where it could not, it rendered infantile – as in the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>5</sup> In its heyday, this consumptive more was, perhaps, best exemplified in the dietary habits of the Imperial British in the Indian subcontinent, a class whose tables reflected their desires to gastronomically perform dominance as much, if not more, than culinary choice and taste.

<sup>6</sup> “If you are told “they are all this” or “they do this” or “their opinions are these”, withhold your judgement until facts are upon you. Because that land they call “India” goes by a thousand names and is populated by millions, and if you think you have found two men the same amongst the multitude, then you are mistaken. It is merely a trick of the moonlight.”

<sup>7</sup> “It’s embarrassing to recall how frightened I was while wandering those unfamiliar streets. But this is the truth: those hours I spent searching for my flat were the most overwhelming of my life. My terror can be blamed perhaps on jet lag and naiveté (I had travelled without sleep for twenty hours to a country I’d never realistically imagined I’d visit), but it was compounded by the fact that I had no Indian currency, I couldn’t get my bank card to work, carried no mobile phone, I was wearing no sunblock, I had no water, and I could discern absolutely no logic in the layout of the hot streets” (Prager 30-31).

<sup>8</sup> “For both Jenny and me, Old Delhi became our favourite part of the city. Old Delhi is what Westerners imagine when we imagine India: narrow streets, bustling alleys, pressing crowds, bleating animals, and ancient buildings with sculpted stone lattices still visible behind jury-rigged aluminium sliding...mobile phone masts competing with minarets to block whatever sunlight still trickles down. Every corner in Old Delhi revealed something we never imagined we’d see: a monkey fight, for instance, or a metal trunk full of severed goat legs...We’d each recall a different experience every time we visited: there was always too much to see in Old Delhi for two people to see the same things. Old Delhi can’t be remembered linearly, but only as sensory bursts, as a mosaic of fleeting thrills that disappeared before they could be focused upon...” (Prager 32-33).

<sup>9</sup> Sam Miller’s *Delhi: Adventures in a Mega-City* may, perhaps, be considered the contemporary archetype for the glocal unravelling the mystery of the subcontinental quotidian through its spirals of walkathons centrifugally round Delhi.

<sup>10</sup> “And our overall impression is this: Delhi is a city without an overarching narrative. It is an amalgamation of neighbourhoods that are liked by municipal decree but without a shared

sense of destiny. Delhi has no unifying story. Delhi is a blank slate. Which isn't a bad thing. That means that Delhi is whatever you make of it. Every person defines Delhi for his or her self, and now two Delhi struggles are the same. At any given point, your experience will be the exact opposite of mine, and we'll both be right. Delhi exists in a kind of quantum state in Delhi, all things are true at once" (Prager 59).

<sup>11</sup> Even if that is, ironically, that there cannot really be one.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, for it can be persuasively argued that given the indispensable cultural moorings of all tourists, and the near-parasitic nature of much of tourism, tourists perceive and behave in accordance to their racial-economic situations. Interpolated into globalisation and informed heavily by neo-imperialism, the urban Indian tourist to, say, the United States of America will see and comprehend much more than the American urbanite in India.

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