

Tales From the Motherland

Prologue: They say India isn't for beginners. They're so right. I'm sure in the past few months, multiple videos have come across your social media feed about this place. They may have enchanted you, outraged you, amazed you, disgusted you, or left you full of unanswered questions. These are all perfectly normal reactions because that IS India my friends. To be quite honest, that's a description of life itself.

The important thing is realizing that regardless of how you feel, India isn't going anywhere. We are talking about the world's most populated country with the largest diaspora community internationally. The world's largest democracy, 3rd biggest economy, and 4th most powerful military. Considering all that, it might be worthwhile to know a bit more about it.

So...what do you want to know about India?

What do you *need* to know about India?

To sum it up in one sentence, India is and always has been a place of extreme contradictions. Rich and poor. Modern and Ancient. A singular place comprised of polymorphic cultures across its 28 states. Each with its own language, cuisine, clothing, traditions, and attitudes. People come from all over the world to find spiritual bliss and peace in this utterly chaotic madhouse. The older I get, the more I think I understand this place, the more questions arise. You will recognize those contradictions throughout the length of this journey.

Mumbai

“Blackbird singing in the dead of night. Take these broken wings and learn to fly.” – The Beatles, Blackbird

Friday, 7:16 pm

Day 1. The automatic double doors at Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport slide open to the outside world and it all comes rushing back. You don’t typically think of humidity as a nostalgic trigger, but this is the Mumbai I know and remember. In fact, this is the only Mumbai I know. That early summer, sticky sub-tropical monsoon air is as inviting as it is prohibitive. If you’ve spent any time in this city, you’ll know it’s an unforgettable characteristic. We arrive at a pivotal moment in India’s history. The national elections have been ongoing for the past 6 weeks and in just a few days, the results will be announced. It’s an all but foregone conclusion that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will secure his 3rd five-year term in office. India’s constitution does not set term limits for its head of state.

The driver helps us load our luggage and we’re on our way. Golden hour approaches its end and gives way to the overcast monsoon sky. It appears one way or another, a storm is coming.

People who get all their news from WhatsApp group chats will tell you Modi is the chosen savior of this nation. People who get all their news from John Oliver will tell you he’s a demon reincarnated. As with most things, the truth lies somewhere in between. I must emphasize from the start, I am not pro or anti Modi at the moment. My opinions are irrelevant because I don’t live in India. I will be here for the better part of a month, partially with family, and partially solo traveling. In that time, I want to hear from the average everyday Indian on how they feel. They are the ones whose opinions truly matter.

India is not utopia. Far from it. There are still obvious problems here. You will notice the Jari Mari slum in Mumbai’s Andheri district as soon as your plane descends onto the runway. There’s no denying or hiding it.

Let’s be real about why things are the way they are. There are 2 big reasons. You already know the first one. A couple centuries of colonialism incurred a lost sum of tens of trillions of dollars and multiple man-made famines. People talk about India being a developing nation. It’s not. It’s a recovering nation.

The other reason is simple, but crucial. Collectively and until very recently, Indians have simply not given a singular shit about the poor. And I’m not talking about since the British left. I mean in the 5000+ years of Indian civilization, we have done very little to help people on the margins. The pervasive attitude towards those people was that they deserved to be there. Because of their color, or because of their family, or because of

their caste. An entire social order was constructed to keep the rich wealthy and the poor starving. That is just the ugly reality of it. Things are changing now because India understands that it can never be considered a 1st world country while a sizable percentage of its population lives without their basic needs met.

At the same time, it would be disingenuous and wrong to not celebrate how far this country has come in such a short time. The roughly 30 minute drive from the airport to the coastal neighborhood of Juhu tells me a lot. The skyscrapers are taller, the lights are brighter, the streets are tidier, the air is cleaner, and the extremely impoverished are harder to find. It's been 10 years since I've been back. Way too long. I never planned for it to be this way. Life just sort of happens; you know?

I was born here. Probably less than 5 miles from where I'm typing this from right now. I used to lie to people and say I wasn't. I would tell them I was born somewhere else. Anywhere else. Once upon a time, the insecurities of my youth made me fear what people would think of me if they knew where I came from. It is after all, the places we come from that shape us. Both my parents were born here too. We all came to the States while I was still an infant.

In those days, this city was an entirely different place. Few cities on Earth have transformed as rapidly and dramatically as Mumbai has in the past 30 years. The city that was once a personal source of needless shame is now on its way to becoming truly world class. A place that every person of South Asian descent can be genuinely proud of. India is the land of diamonds and dirt, our first contradiction. It's hard to understand how grotesque levels of wealth and poverty can coexist in such proximity.

The United Nations estimates that 415 million citizens have been lifted out of poverty in just the last 15 years. That's just a unfathomable amount of people. On the other end of the spectrum, India is now home to the 3rd highest number of billionaires in the world. A number that is projected to double its current total by 2040. Much of this has happened under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. People wear their pride and dignity on their faces now. In 2023, Ipsos, the global market research firm, conducted a poll where 73% of urban Indians believed their country was heading in the right direction. When Americans were asked the same question, only 23% of respondents answered optimistically. It's a special thing to be in an environment where positive energy radiates around you. It's something tangible that you can feel.

That's enough for now though. We've got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow and jet lag is beating my ass.

Saturday, 10:57am

Morning. Close your eyes and just listen.

That combination of 236cc 4-stroke rickshaw engines rumbling and omnipresent honking will just sound like disorderly noise to you. But to my foolishly sentimental

ADHD brain, it's a symphony. It's the soundtrack of this city. Contradiction number 2. Mumbai is defined by organized chaos. The traffic, the lifestyle, the real estate, the neighborhoods. It doesn't make any logical sense how this place functions. It shouldn't work, but somehow does. Mumbai is India's most cosmopolitan city. Its history has been shaped and sculpted over several centuries by its various indigenous and expatriate inhabitants. Today, it is the financial, entertainment, and fashion capital of the entire subcontinent.

The inception of this city remains somewhat of a mystery. If you go by written history, the first recorded text of the city goes back to the 9th century, during the Silhara Dynasty. If you prefer to go by archeological history, you can go as far back as 200 BCE. There are some who even suggest the earliest inhabitants of Mumbai go back well beyond even that, predating the end of stone age.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive here in 1534, almost 100 years before the British. They were the ones who coined the name "Bombay", or as they intended, "Bom-Bahia", as it roughly translates to "The Good Bay" in Portuguese. First stop for today: Kala Ghoda, South Bombay. Kala Ghoda's literal meaning is "Black Horse", named after the statue that sits in the middle of King Edward VII, erected in 1878. Post independence, King Edward was removed, and his horse is all that remains.

Today, Kala Ghoda has a kind of a bohemian art district kind of vibe. Within this labyrinth of Victorian and Gothic style buildings and small alleyways is home to every manner of vendor. At the forefront of Kala Ghoda's fashion scene is Sabyasachi. It's a name that carries a lot of weight. At the moment, Sabyasachi Mukherjee (no relation) isn't just the talk of the town in Mumbai's fashion district. He's one of the most in demand fashion designers in the world. In the past few months alone, his works have adorned Met Gala red carpets, billionaire weddings, and perhaps most importantly, Rihanna's Instagram page.

In his own words, Sabyasachi describes his design aesthetic as an unapologetic ode to Indo-Maximalism. For this reason, his label has been dubbed by some as India's Versace. Although well intentioned, that title does a disservice to the philosophy and craftsmanship you'll find permeating across his flagship stores. If you can't look past the style, you will miss the substance.

To tell the story about the man, and the brand, we have to go back in time to the eastern city of Kolkata (Calcutta) where Mr. Mukherjee hails from. His mother worked at a state-run arts college, where she specialized in handicrafts. His father, having lost his job and sense of pride when Sabyasachi was a teenager, was determined that his son would not face the same fate. As is the case across India and the Indian diaspora, the hardships and trauma of parents are passed down to their children in the form of overprotection and strict discipline. His parents pleaded with him to seek a career as an engineer or doctor. The young boy, however, would get lost in the world of his mother's textiles and dreamed of something far bigger. Without their initial blessings, he sold off whatever little he had to fund his own admission to India's National Institute of Fashion

Technology. Upon his graduation in 2002, he took on a small loan to open a fashion label under his own name and bet everything on his first collection to be unveiled at India's Fashion Week. This was Sabyasachi's 8 Mile moment. Everything he had worked for and sacrificed came down to this singular moment. And it worked. Whereas his peers in India's fashion industry have spent much of the past couple decades searching outside of India for styles and inspiration, Sabyasachi has always looked inward. He seeks out and works alongside expert artisans to revive and preserve traditional techniques like block-printing and hand dyed embroidery. He then seamlessly blends these classical elements with contemporary designs and luxurious fabrics to create his distinct signature style.

The brand currently has 4 flagship stores across India and entered the US market back in 2022 with a storefront in New York City's West Village neighborhood. Sabyasachi has now ventured into western style clothing as well. Although most people won't be able to afford its many offerings (I certainly can't), if you ever find yourself presented with the opportunity to visit a Sabyasachi, you absolutely should. It's what the man himself intended. Don't think of these places as clothing stores. They are living breathing museums, with a passionate, borderline maniacal level of care and attention to detail. Every single piece of furnishing in a Sabyasachi store is originally sourced, often requiring a painstaking restoration process. I walk out without making a purchase, but I feel fulfilled, nonetheless.

10:13pm

I don't know what the term "foodie" means. Is it just a person who enjoys food? Isn't that like 90% of all people? The way we engage with food nowadays annoys me. Conversations have just been boiled down to lazy reviews of people quantifying their experience from a scale of 1-10 with very little thoughtfulness beyond that. I'm not exempt from this, and to some extent, I completely understand. We want the most useful information in the shortest possible time. We don't care about stories; we care about ratings and rankings. Just tell me how many stars. Gold stars, Michelin stars, whatever. That's the end of it.

But food is perhaps the most subjective of all art forms. What you like or don't like is influenced by so many conscious and subconscious factors. Therefore, it's really difficult to say "Hey, this is the *best* restaurant out there." So, while Masque has the distinction of being India's best restaurant, I'll practice restraint. I mean, this place has made Asia's Top 50 Restaurants List 4 years in a row and will likely crack The World's Top 50 Restaurants list next year, but let's not dwell on that. What I can say definitively however, is that Masque is by far India's most *important* restaurant right now.

I'm writing this after having one of the most memorable meals of my entire life. I was exposed to ingredients, flavors, and techniques that I had never even heard of 4 hours ago. The staff were so unbelievably kind and knowledgeable. The 48 seat industrially designed fine dining establishment is in an old textile mill in Mumbai's Mahalaxmi neighborhood. The restaurant's top secret test kitchen, Masque Lab, is here too. This

area was a manufacturing hub for many years. As the city grew, factories ran out of space and relocated. In their absence, entrepreneurial minds like those behind Masque brought their ideas here to create something new.

At Masque, you are offered a 10-course tasting menu, with your only choice being vegetarian or non-vegetarian. At the time of its opening in 2016, no other restaurant in the country solely offered their patrons a tasting menu. Founder Aditi Dugar and head chef Varun Totlani had to fight tooth and nail to get to this point. Historically, India and Indians have tended to be more risk averse by nature. We are fundamentally resistant to change. As a result of our past, conserving tradition often becomes the priority above all else. You do something because that's way it's always been done. Don't ask why. New ideas, new ways of thinking are often suppressed or met with skepticism.

Masque broke through the glass ceiling, and they've been pushing the envelope ever since. More than any other restaurant in the country, it is responsible for changing the way people feel about Indian cuisine. Indigenous ingredients you can't find anywhere else in the world are thoughtfully prepared and showcased in ways that capture the essence of what India was, is, and can be.

Today wasn't about window shopping and a nice dinner. Today was about experiencing India coming into its own. You need to understand that this country was closed off economically from the rest of the world till 1991. For nearly half a century post-independence, foreign brands and companies were banned in India with the intent of protecting domestic industries. In hindsight, it was a massive miscalculation that halted India's development for decades. 20 years ago, it was a big deal if you were out in Mumbai and came across a Lacoste, Tommy Hilfiger, or Ralph Lauren store. 20 years ago, the trendiest restaurant in town you would go to celebrate or impress your friends was TGI Fridays. Not having access to Western commerce for so many years gave those brands a sense of exclusivity. Indian fashion and Indian restaurants were treated as substandard. Sabyasachi and Masque are representative of the modern India. A country with confidence and pride in itself. A country that looks internally for inspiration instead of beyond its borders.

Wednesday, 12:01pm

The election results have been announced. Narendra Modi will be India's prime minister for at least another 5 more years. That part was expected. What wasn't expected was how close of a race it ended up being. It was far from a landslide. Modi's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), actually ended up losing power in the legislature. To me, the entire tone of this journey has shifted a bit. You see, I came here and have only noticed the positive changes so far. The ones most visible to the naked eye. But as I acknowledged before, I don't live here. I only speak for myself. India speaks for itself, and Indians has spoken clearly. In the coming weeks, I will try to reach my own conclusions about how this happened and where I believe India is destined to go from here. But first, I must go do one of my favorite things in India. Get Chinese food.

People think of “globalism” like a brand-new phenomenon. Like some recently developed satanic ideology wealthy and powerful people have forcibly thrust upon the working class to oppress or weaken them. All globalism is, by definition, is the exchange of ideas, people, commerce, and goods across physical and cultural borders. That has existed as long as human beings have had civilized society. Nearly a thousand years ago, Marco Polo traveled from Europe to China and documented globalism in action across the Silk Road. Some 600 years before him, there was a Buddhist monk by the name of Xuanzang who narrated his own expeditions across China and India. His transcriptions are amongst the earliest recorded exchanges between these two great ancient civilizations.

The largest wave of Chinese immigration to India occurred in the 1800s, primarily to work on British owned tea plantations across Northeast India and Bengal. As they do so brilliantly all over the globe, Chinese immigrants found a way to assimilate by adapting their cuisine to suit local palettes. The Chinese food in India is unlike anything else as a result. “Indo-Chinese” stands alone as its own genre of cuisine, supremely popular not just in India, but any place where you will find a community of Indians. I’ll give you some of the highlights you will find on every Indo-Chinese menu.

- Manchow Soup – A peppery, umami flavored soup utilizing chicken or vegetable-based broth, thickened with corn starch, and heavily infused with ginger to provide zest. Traditional garnishes include chopped scallions, mushrooms, shrimp, and carrots.
- Manchurian Style – Ground chicken meatballs or cauliflower coated in a cornstarch batter, deep fried, then stir fried in a wok with a savory sauce consisting of ginger, lots of garlic, green chilies, scallions, dark and light soy sauce, and a touch of chili infused vinegar.
- Chili Style – Sliced boneless chicken, fish, paneer, shrimp, or vegetables marinated with salt, white/black pepper, red chili powder, ginger, and garlic which gets stir fried with other aromatics, onions, bell peppers, and just lightly coated with a tangy ketchup red like sauce.
- Hakka Noodles: Stir-fried noodles with egg, vegetables, and sometimes meat, flavored with soy sauce, vinegar, and Indian spices. Hakka refers to the Hakka Han people of China who made up the first wave of immigrants to India. They primarily came from places in Southern China like Fujian and Guangdong.

In my most humble of opinions, China Gate right by Juhu Beach is the gold standard in Mumbai for Indo-Chinese. Lin’s Pavilion in Colaba is quite famous as well if you want to try a legacy restaurant. Regardless of what you decide, Indo-Chinese is ubiquitous. You

can find it everywhere and there's a level of consistency you can expect no matter where you go, which I find so comforting.

As I devour this wonderful lunch, my mind can't help but drift back to the election. I think about how the descendants of those first East Asian immigrants make up a sizable portion of the population in Northeastern states like Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. I think about how, despite carrying East Asian ethnic features ethnic, those descendants consider themselves to be Indian. They are of course. For a long time, those communities were undeveloped and ignored because of how they looked. There was no real political incentive to reach out to them. On one hand, many of those states have been granted new life through Modi's economic initiatives. On the other hand, the communities I mentioned have reported widespread discrimination due to their genealogy across the rest of India. Those states had a record turnout in this election. I'm hoping things will become clearer in a week's time when we go to the source of political power in this country. New Delhi.

Delhi

"In the land where hurt people hurt more people, fuck calling it culture" - Kendrick Lamar, The Heart pt. 5

Tuesday, 12:44pm:

It's my first time in Delhi and....It's hot. Nah man...like....barbarically hot. Abusively, savagely hot. The city is currently in the midst of its worst heat wave in recorded history. I'm told a couple weeks ago, things hit 123.8 degrees Fahrenheit (51 C). The white paint on pedestrian walkways were reported melting. I've never experienced heat like this. It's obscene, frankly. The app on my phone says 110 degrees but I assure you it feels far worse. The UV index is also alarmingly high, which changes the very way heat makes contact with your skin. It feels like someone slapped your face, then scraped your wounds with sandpaper.

The summertime is the off season in Delhi. But if you do find yourself here at a moment in time like this, you'll need to plan your days strategically. Wake up super early, get all your sightseeing done in the morning or around sundown. Find air conditioning and catch up on sleep in the afternoon. Rinse and repeat. Adapt and survive.

Understanding Delhi is fundamental to understanding India. It brings us to our next extreme contradiction. Modernity and Antiquity. They exist simultaneously all over India, but especially in the nation's capital. There is a massive misconception that exists about this country being old. Yes, our culture is old, ancient in fact. But the reality of India as a federated nation state is very much in its adolescence. Prior to 1947, there was very little that unified all the various subregions and cultures of India. There are 22 official

languages in this country, and unofficially, if you include dialects, there are anywhere from 200 to 20,000 languages spoken here. How could there be any unity?

When some people hear the word nationalism, they feel an uneasiness creep into their body. Their mind begins conjuring up images of dictators shouting into microphones while a military parades its weaponry in the background. But in a disjointed, highly diverse place like this, I would argue that nationalism is essential. You need people to have a sense of collectivism. To work towards a common greater good. Nationalism, globalism, capitalism, socialism...I've come to understand that no ideology is inherently bad. All of them have some practical value depending on time and context. They are just tools. A hammer can be used to build a house or break it down. It all depends on who's holding it and why.

"Delhi" is New Delhi and Old Delhi. It's quintessential tale of 2 cities that, combined with its surrounding suburbs, account for a staggering population of 33 million people. In addition to being the seat of power, Delhi is arguably India's cultural capital as well. While Mumbai is responsible for India's pop culture, Delhi is more representative of the kind of lives Indians really live.

In 1911, the British decided to shift the capital away from Calcutta (Kolkata) in the East to a more central location. A British officer by the name of Edward Lutyens was tasked with designing and constructing a city that could adequately serve as an administrative hub for the British Empire's crown jewel. Lutyens was heavily influenced by French style city planning. This is the reason why parts of New Delhi will feel similar to Paris or Washington DC, which were also designed in a similar manner. In South Delhi, you'll find the swank and opulent embassy district. If you are a visitor here, chances are your hotel will be somewhere in this area.

Unlike Mumbai, New Delhi isn't a vertical city. You won't find many skyscrapers here as local regulations and zoning orders prevent that. As a result, things are more spread out, which emphasizes the need for more organized infrastructure and public transportation. Regardless of where you are in New Delhi or Old Delhi, you are never more than 30-45 minutes away from wherever you want to go. Depending on traffic in Mumbai, it may take you that long just to get across a few neighborhoods.

Thursday, 9:49 AM:

The 20th century reconstruction of Delhi as the capital was a bit of a comeback story for the city. From its inception, power has always been a part of Delhi's ethos. In the 1st Century BCE, Raja Dhilu, Delhi's first ruler and namesake, ordered the construction of a settlement at the present site of Qutub Minar in the Southwestern corner of the city. It's our first stop this morning.

Qutub Minar, at the time of its completion in 1220, was amongst the tallest freestanding buildings in the world, second only to the Great Pyramid of Giza. It came 150 years before the Leaning Tower of Pisa and is roughly about 30% taller than that poorly

constructed, flaccid Italian mistake. This incredible red sandstone minaret was commissioned by Qutb-ud-din Aibak as a monument of victory and to honor a Sufi saint. The tower represents the introduction of Islam in India. The land upon which Qutub Minar was constructed was previously the site of over 20 Hindu temples, which were torn down by the Delhi Sultanate. The remnants of those temples are still visible today.

After a few days of hopping around from one monument to the next, from one historical sight to another, the story of Qutub Minar echoes a reoccurring theme across Delhi. Mosques being built on top of torn down temples. Temples being built on top of torn down mosques. This is the story of Delhi. This city wasn't built on red sandstone and marble. It was built on bodies. This city's history isn't documented with pen and paper and written in ink. It's documented with sword and scepter and written in blood. I knew all this already, but it's exhausting to see it first-hand.

It does however, provide a lot of context of the man who sits on the proverbial throne now. Narendra Damodaras Modi. It's time to talk about Hindutva, a key belief of Modi and the BJP. You and I would describe the expression as "Hindu Nationalism", or the idea that Hinduism should serve as the guiding social and political ideology in India. From the mid-12th century all the way to 1947, Hindus did not rule over this land. The religion survived through around 800 years of Islamic sultanates, the Mughal Empire, then the British Empire. All of whom were keen to showcase their dominance in unimaginably cruel ways. When the British divided this land into the Hindu majority India and Muslim majority Pakistan, the subsequent partition led to the horrific deaths of as many as 2 million people in just a span of 2 months. 15 million people were displaced from their homes. Tens of thousands of women from both sides were systematically raped. It was amongst the darkest moments in human history.

By far the biggest criticism levied against Modi throughout his time in office has been his divisive rhetoric and policies towards Muslim Indians. That he exploits that trauma and those deeply inflicted scars for his personal benefit. Some of the more radical members of the BJP have gone as far as publicly calling for violence against Muslims. The biggest stain on Modi's political career is the controversy surrounding his role in the 2002 Gujrat riots. It started with the burning of a train carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from a holy site. 59 people lost their lives. As an act of retaliation, the next 3 days saw a widespread wave of communal violence targeting Muslim neighborhoods. As the Chief Minister for the State of Gujrat, Modi has been accused of standing idle as the violence broke out.

Hindu Nationalism. Even phonetically, it just sounds weird, doesn't it? My friends, we have arrived at our 4th contradiction. Hindu Nationalism is as pure an oxymoron as you could hope to find. I'll divide the two words and analyze them independently to make my point.

Hindu, a follower of Hinduism. What does it mean to be Hindu? We are talking about the only major religion in the world that is inherently pluralistic. I don't mean pluralism in that there are multiple Gods. That is a huge misconception of this religion. I mean pluralistic

in the sense that multiple recognized pathways towards the celestial. Whereas this would be blasphemy in Abrahamic religions, Hindus are encouraged to coexist amongst other faiths and learn more about them. This idea is fundamentally rooted in Vedic scripture. The Rig Veda states "*Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti*", meaning "*Truth is one, the wise call it by many names.*" To be a good Hindu is to sit in a mosque. To be a good Hindu is to read the Bible. To be a good Hindu is to acknowledge that while the source of divine energy may be singular, there are multiple pathways to achieve union with divinity, and that all those pathways are valid so long as they are sincere.

With that understanding, we move onto Nationalism, a sociopolitical ideology that emphasizes the promotion of the nation-state above the interests of individuals or other cultures. Promotion of the nation-state. India has always been a secular country from its birth. Secularism is enshrined in the preamble of its constitution.

India's founding fathers like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar all advocated for a separation of the state and religious institutions. They understood that democracy, social justice, and national unity could only exist through pluralism. Gandhi wasn't killed by Muslims. He was killed by people who didn't agree with him that Muslims had a rightful place in India.

Hindutva also insults the legacy of the many Muslim and Sikh freedom fighters like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Bhagat Singh who played essential roles in the independence movement. The story I enjoyed reading about the most was the life of Begum Hazrat Mahal. She was born into a life of prostitution but managed to make it out. Begum Hazrat Mahal earned the reputation of being a firebrand after her husband's exile, advocating on behalf of both Hindus and Muslims. She was outraged that her oppressors would so casually decimate places of worship for financial pursuit. She was so universally admired that her peers appointed her the leader of the rebel state of Awadh. They addressed her as "The Pride of Awadh". At just 37 years old, this woman helped lead an uprising in Lucknow against the British East India Company in 1857. She wasn't just the symbolic face of a movement. Begum Hazrat Mahal got her hands dirty; doing everything from organizing and leading her troops, strategizing tactics, fortifying defenses, and acting as an ambassador to recruit more support from neighboring villages.

Did you know that there are more mosques in India than Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq combined? Did you know that there are about as many Muslims in India than there are people in the Pakistan? Did you know that Buddhism started in India? Did you know there are more Christians in India than there are people in Australia? You can't just separate these communities from the social fabric of this country. You can't disentangle their lineage from Indian identity. To say you support an India for Hindus first and foremost doesn't just make you a bad Hindu. It makes you a bad Indian. It's a way of thinking that is so fundamentally antithetical to what this country represents.

If you turn on one of India's 6 million cable news channels, you'll find all the pundits and analysts screaming at each other trying to explain how the election panned out the way it did. Some people are overjoyed. Others are distraught. Many have their own

agendas. But to me, the past few days makes it clear. When you take the results in entirety, the average citizen is clearly appreciative of the work Modi has done to modernize and develop this country. At the same time, the world's largest democracy has decided to safeguard itself by minimizing Modi's unilateral power. As a result of the election, Modi will be forced to work with opposition parties, negotiate with minority groups, and reach compromises over this next half decade.

Friday, 7:22pm

Friday night in Old Delhi, very cinematic. It's a beautiful night. I'm catching a vibe out here. The van drops us off outside Jama Masjid just in time for Salat al-Maghrib, the Friday evening prayer. Jama Masjid was built at the height of the Mughal Empire in the mid 17th century and is one of the largest and most famous mosques in India. It shares many architectural similarities with the Taj Mahal, from its 360-degree symmetrical design to its iconic dome tops. Old Delhi is one of the most densely populated areas in one the most densely populated cities on Earth. There are roughly 75,000 people per square mile here. Without much space to unwind and relax, the locals, even non-Muslims, will congregate to the Masjid to do just that. The mosque complex is said to be able to accommodate a capacity of 25,000 people.

Many of the post partition refugees settled in Old Delhi. Proximity and diversity. This is why Old Delhi is considered the cultural soul of India. The crowds and narrow alleyways make it impossible to travel by car. Your only 2 real options are to walk or to take a cart rickshaw pulled by bicycle. For the experience, we opt for the latter. We head towards Chandini Chowk, the oldest and most iconic marketplace in Old Delhi. There is no Muslim quarter or Hindu quarter in Old Delhi. Everything exists bundled together, stacked on top of each other. We notice the Sis Ganj Sahib Gurudwara (Sikh), the Narsingh Hanuman Mandir (Hindu), and the Central Baptist Church (Christian) all within the first 500 yards of the rickshaw ride. These communities have lived side by side for generations. I imagine, it hasn't always been easy. But they've found a way to make it work. The frenetic energy and congestion of Old Delhi was a lot to handle at first. But after seeing what I've seen, I feel so much better. No just after yesterday either, I feel much more optimistic about India in general.

Let me set the scene for you. As the sun sets, the golden glow of streetlamps and shop lights begin to take over. Someone is playing Diljit Dosanjh's "Naina" from a speaker close by (he killed that hook btw, song of the summer out here). It blends perfectly with the sounds of bicycle bells ringing and kebabs sizzling from street stalls. The people of Delhi are known for their loud personalities and flashy over-the-top sense of style. And after a long week of work, people are dressed in their best. Old Delhi is a tapestry of colorful kurtas, saris, and shirts. The alleys of Chandini Chowk are alive with young people out with their friends or on dates, perhaps on their way to grab some biriyani from Karim's or some chaat from Natraj. The air smells of cinnamon and incense sticks from the nearby shrines.

My family stops for some aloo parathas at the famous Parathe Wali Gali (Paratha Street) at a 100-year-old store. I opt not to try, partially for hygienic concerns, which could be better. It's nothing crazy, but I'm just being cautious. Mostly though, I'm saving my appetite for what's to come. We are going to experience something special later. Something that started here and went on to captivate the whole world.

We head back to the van to depart Old Delhi. Several people are wearing or selling Indian cricket jerseys. The T20 Cricket World Cup is on-going, and India plays Pakistan on Sunday (in New York, ironically). There is no point, not even during national holidays, when Indians feel more patriotic than during a cricket match vs Pakistan. We make our way out of town with the imposing silhouette Red Fort looming large in the distance. As night falls, the red sandstone walls are cascaded with soft ambient lighting. Old Delhi as I experienced it was just like in the movies. Dynamic, chaotic, crowded, but charming.

Saturday, 12:08am

I'm here to debrief about dinner and discuss something very important. The Battle of Butter Chicken. As India's cultural soft power gains ground throughout the world, there is no dish that has won over the hearts of people more than the beloved Butter Chicken (Murgh Makhani). I absolutely hate when I see someone of Indian descent try to shame non-Indians for getting Butter Chicken and Mango Lassi from their local Indian restaurant for being supposedly "too basic". Listen man, I'm here to tell you butter chicken is fucking delicious. End of. There is something genuinely wrong with you if you can't appreciate it and all its rich, slightly sweet, creamy, and savory goodness. It's the definition of comfort food. Which makes it even more ironic that the debate over this recipe's genesis is fraught with controversy, family feuds, legal drama.

Here's what we know....

Kundan Lal Gujral and his cousin Kundan Lal Jaggi were Punjabi refugees who came to Old Delhi's Daryaganj district post partition. The two, having previously worked at a sweet shop in Pakistan, decided to open a small dhaba (roadside food stall) called Moti Mahal. Gujral was in charge of the food while his cousin Jaggi oversaw the business. At some point in the late 1940s, Murgh Makahi was born here. The mythology of this dish indicates its creation was unintentional. Just a happy accident. The story told by Moti Mahal is Gujral was experimenting with ways to extend the shelf life of his inventory. He began taking leftover pieces of bone-in tandoori chicken and adding them to a tomato-based sauce to prevent the meat from getting too dry. Murgh Makhani's popularity exploded in Delhi as Gujral continued to refine his recipe. By the time Gujral passed away in 1997, Butter Chicken had become one of the recognizable and essential dishes in the cannon of Indian cuisine. It's a nice story right?

Fast forward to April of 2019, 13 months after Kundan Lal Jaggi's death. Jaggi's grandson Raghav opens a restaurant called Dayaganj who begin to advertise themselves as the inventors of Butter Chicken. The story from Jaggi's perspective claims the first batch of Butter Chicken wasn't cooked up by Gujral in Delhi, but by both

Gujral AND Jaggi all the way back in Peshawar, Pakistan before partition. Daryaganj alleges that one night, the kitchen staff at the sweet shop improvised a meal with leftover ingredients to feed themselves. They assert that Jaggi played an equal role inventing the first batch of Butter Chicken, and that Jaggi has never been properly credited with his contribution. In January of 2024, Gujral's descendants filed a 2,752 page lawsuit against Daryaganj. The case is still being heard by Delhi's High Court.

I don't have a dog in this fight, and the only two people who know what really happened are dead. I'm inclined to believe Moti Mahal's version of things. Jaggi lived for over 20 years after Gujral's passing. There is no documented evidence of him ever having an issue with his level of acknowledged contribution, or lack thereof. Despite this, we ended up going to Daryaganj as that's what the majority of locals say makes the better version of the dish today. We drive 20 minutes to Aerocity, a massive state of the art retail and entertainment complex by the airport. It's another hour wait to be seated. My mom and I think it was worth it. My dad and sister disagree. The "original" Butter Chicken is a bit more tangy than the version found in America. My dad believes this wasn't intentional and that the dish was served to us undercooked. In a way, the Battle of Butter Chicken is representative of partition as a whole. They are tales of division resulting in the dispute of cultural origins and ownership. Friends and families split apart at the seams. The truth will reveal itself in due time. However, on my next visit to Delhi, I won't care about finding the first Butter Chicken, just the best Butter Chicken.

In about 8 hours we'll take the road south for about 150 miles towards the Taj Mahal in Agra. We'll be there for a couple of days. Believe it or not, this will be my first time seeing India's most famous monument. I won't be writing about it though. It just feels like low hanging fruit. The next time you hear from me, I'll have left my family to start my solo trip. I'm going to the state of Uttarakhand, the land of mystics and mountains.

Uttarakhand

"You're my river running high. Run deep, run wild." - Lykke Li, I Follow Rivers

Monday, 9:51am

The hustle and bustle of Mumbai and Delhi have taken their toll. I say my goodbyes and part ways with my family. We both follow the Ganga (Ganges River) but go in opposite directions. I go North towards the mountains. My parents and sister head south towards the ancient city of Varanasi. It's an 8-hour drive from Agra to Uttarakhand, a state that until recently, I knew very little about. Uttarakhand literally translates to "Northern Land". It's west of Nepal and Southwest of Tibet. First stop is the city of Rishikesh, situated at the foothills of the Himalayas and alongside the banks of the Ganga.

The state of Uttarakhand has always had the reputation of being a getaway, in multiple senses. In the summertime especially, people come here from nearby cities like Delhi

and Chandigarh to beat the crowds and cool off. This place is a spiritual getaway as well. Rishikesh is sanctified land, perhaps because this is the birthplace of Yoga, or perhaps due to its association with the holy river. People from all over the globe have made spiritual pilgrimages here to find peace of mind, just as I have. The Beatles are the most famous example, and arguably the ones who put Rishikesh on the map to the outside world.

August 24, 1967. Paul, John, George, and Ringo are a few months removed from the release of their 8th and most commercially successful album, Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. The Liverpool quartet are amongst the most famous and recognizable faces on the planet, but at this point in their careers, fame had only become a burden. This moment in time wasn't just the height of the Beatles success, it was also the height of the Vietnam War. The height of the nuclear arms race. It felt as if the entire world was in turmoil. The band is physically and mentally exhausted.

Under the weight of this backdrop, George Harrison recommends to his mates that they all attend a seminar in London hosted by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the Hindu religious leader credited with introducing transcendental meditation to the West. George was the first of the group to visit in India in 1966. He fell in love with Indian culture while studying and collaborating with the legendary sitar player Ravi Shankar. The day ends with the 4 boys meeting the Yogi and receiving an invite to visit his ashram in Rishikesh. Just 3 days after this, The Beatles' longtime manager and close friend, Brian Epstein, is found dead in his bedroom from an accidental overdose at the age of 32. Epstein was like an older brother to the boys, the unofficial 5th Beatle. His death left The Beatles without their most trusted advisor and created a deep sense of uncertainty for the band's future.

In February of 1968, The Beatles go to Rishikesh with the intent of escaping their fame and finding tranquility. However, the band did not find the peace of mind they were so desperate for. From the moment they landed in India, they were followed everywhere by the international press. Behind the scenes footage from the Disney documentary, The Beatles: Get Back, features a scene with George Harrison recounting the band's experience in India. George notes that although the band went to Rishikesh to find themselves, they were acting like anything but themselves the whole time. These young men realized that they could escape England, but they couldn't escape their fame or personal problems. They came together but left separately. Ringo left the ashram after just 10 days. Paul left after a month. John and George stayed back for 2 months. While it wasn't the experience they had hoped for, The Beatles time in India was a creatively prolific and landmark moment for the band. It is estimated that somewhere between 30 to 40 songs were written during their time in Rishikesh including most of The White Album.

The Beatles broke up in 1970. Some historians who cover the band believe that tensions amongst the group first appeared towards the end of their time in Rishikesh. The boys suffered without the guidance of Epstein to mediate creative and personal

differences. There's a public exhibition in Rishikesh dedicated to the band, but you'd be best to skip it. It's just a tourist trap. You'll end up just as disillusioned as them.

Monday, 5:32 pm

I arrive at a picturesque retreat just outside the city of Rishikesh. I'm lucky enough to be staying at a property right by a very auspicious and picturesque bend of the Ganges River. We'll discuss the river in detail soon, but first, a bit about Yoga. Yes, yoga. Rishikesh is sometimes referred to as the Yoga Capital of the World. I know what some of you are thinking. I was skeptical too. I thought all yoga enthusiasts could be divided into 2 main groups.

1. People who aren't that into Yoga but need some internal justification for their \$1000 credit card bill from Lululemon
2. People who are genuinely and insufferably into Yoga. Never shutting up about how good it is for you. They're like Vegans. Or Cyclists. Yeah yeah yeah, we get it. Go save the world with your stretching and impossible burgers.

Then I injured my knee back in March, becoming an 87-year-old man overnight. It was debilitating. I couldn't move. I couldn't live. I was told I just had to wait it out. Let the body do its thing for a week, let the inflammation subside. One week turned into two. Two weeks turned into three. Things weren't getting better. My physical therapist recommended I give yoga a chance. I begrudgingly agreed and haven't looked back since. I'm just a novice, and it's only for about 15 minutes a day. Nonetheless, I have experienced numerous tangible benefits from adopting yoga into my daily routine. The intent was simply building back some strength and balance in my lower body. What I've gained out of this goes far beyond that, however. I sleep better. My chronic asthma has been easier to manage. I have more energy throughout the day. My digestion has improved. It seems far-fetched to attribute all, or even some of this, to 15 minutes of very basic stretching every morning. But that's only if you aren't aware of the depth and origins of this ancient discipline.

As I've alluded to before, we don't really know how old India or Indian civilization is. A roundabout conservative estimate is at least 7,000 years, but a lot of ancient knowledge and recorded history did not survive the last millennium. There are some historians who suggest the roots of Indian civilization goes much further back than that. The earliest evidence of human remains in South Asia were discovered in the 1950s by a Sri Lankan archaeologist named Paul E. P. Deraniyagala. The skeletal fragments he unearthed were carbon dated as being over 30,000 years old. What scholars can agree on, is that the origin of yoga started here in Uttarakhand and is about as old as Indian civilization itself. One of the most famous examples to corroborate this theory is the archeological discovery the Pashupati Seal from the Mohenjo-Daro excavation site, which depicts figures taking up very recognizable yogic postures (asanas).

Yogic philosophy states that the physical body and the metaphysical world are part of the same interconnected system. Christians believe in this idea as well. In Luke 17:21, Jesus says “The Kingdom of God is within you”. It makes perfect sense if you apply modern astrophysical understanding as well. We are made up of the same elemental materials that are found in and come from the universe itself.

Let's start with the part much easier for the layman to grasp. The physical benefits of yoga are in the various asanas themselves. Each physical pose purposely targets a specific organ or anatomical system in the body. There are postures such as Bhujangasana (Cobra) which stretch abdominal muscles to stimulate the digestive tract or relieve bloating. Dhanurasana (Bow) stretches your diaphragm open, increasing lung capacity to enhance respiratory function. It also helps in clear nasal passages. Halasana (Plow) is an inversion pose which contracts the thyroid, parathyroid, and adrenal glands, aiding in hormonal balance. Very simply, you can think of these asanas as targeted exercises to stimulate blood circulation and oxygen to respective parts of the body. Makes sense right? These would be considered the amongst the basic, ground level techniques in Yoga. But wait, the rabbit hole goes deep, I can go further I promise.

Very, very basically. In yogic philosophy, it's believed that once these basic asanas are perfected, one can move on to far more advanced practices to achieve higher states of consciousness and even supernatural abilities known as Siddhis. Yogis believe that a person can attain Siddhis such as telepathy, levitation, and precognition through the cumulative mastery of physical postures (Asanas), breath control (Pranayama), withdrawal of senses (Pratyahara), concentration (Dharana), meditation (Dhyana), and absorption (Samadhi). Each step is designed to purify the body and mind, leading to higher states of being.

I'm sure I've done nothing but increase your level of skepticism. I'm not saying all of this is possible. I don't know what I don't know. 6 months ago, I didn't even buy into the surface level benefits of yoga. But what I will say is that I believe modern science has made us extremely arrogant. History is littered with examples of each generation believing they had all the answers, only to be proven wrong by the next generation. There's so much we don't know or don't understand. About the universe. About ourselves. Operating on the basis of what we *feel* versus what we *know* is amongst the biggest differences in the Eastern and Western ideologies. It's the reason why recipes are passed down in exact measurements in Western cultures but through intuition and instinct in Eastern cultures.

You can choose to laugh this off as I did for many years. But before you do, I'd encourage you to look up a Dutch man by the name of Wim “The Iceman” Hof. Wim has credited pranayama and other yogic practices in achieving other worldly, superhuman feats such as immersing himself in ice for almost 2 hours, running for over 5 hours in the Arctic Circle, and climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in just his shorts and shoes. In 2014, Wim took part in a controlled experiment where he was voluntarily injected with the E. Coli bacteria. Wim was able to reduce his symptoms caused by the endotoxin solely

through meditation and breathing exercises, suggesting that he possessed the ability to voluntarily influence his autonomic nervous system and immune response. Scientists have not yet found an explanation for Wim or his abilities. The key word is yet. Maybe the answers of tomorrow exist somewhere in the wisdoms of yesterday.

Wednesday, 7:36pm

Misunderstood. Worshipped. Ridiculed. Celebrated. Abused. We've come to our next extreme contradiction.

It's time to talk about the river.

Not a river, **THE** river.

This ancient, almighty river covers over 1,500 miles of land from the Himalayan peaks to the Bay of Bengal. At each turn she carves up and curates this landscape into spellbinding scenery. She provides life to half a billion human beings, and one of Earth's most biodiverse ecosystems every single day. In terms of its cultural significance, sheer power, or the countless number of people who have relied on it over thousands of years, this is one of the truly great rivers in the world. Right up there with the Amazon and the Nile. Back home they know it as the Ganges. Here, they just call her Ma Ganga. The mother of all rivers. The river from the heavens.

Around where I'm staying, the water is quite clean, actually. We are close to the source, and this isn't a very populated area. The hue of the river changes depending on the season, from ice blue in the winter, to turquoise, to teal, to clay towards midsummer due to sediment and soil runoffs from landslides. As the sediment clears, and winter approaches, the colors transition in reverse back to its glacial shade. It's not until you come up close that you gain a level of respect for its power. The current is forceful; the water is frigid and unforgiving.

All the guests at this property are invited to take part in a daily ritual performed at dusk to honor the river, known as the Ganga Aarti. This devotional ceremony involves the offering of light (tealights or candles) and something from the land (flowers or fruits) wrapped up in a large green leaf. The offering is then sent downstream as a blessing to the deities. It's a beautiful sight to experience. This ritual is performed daily in cities and villages all along the river.

Obviously, the further downstream you go, and the more people that come in contact with the river, the more polluted it becomes. This is a sensitive topic. I have to be careful about how I address this. For a long time, the public narrative regarding this river has been nothing but negative. I think that much of that criticism is fair. How can it be regarded as a sacred river, but still be mistreated and neglected so carelessly? I think perspective is important here as well. Humans have a corrosive footprint on the environment. That's just nature. When so many people have survived off of this river for so many millennia, of course it is going to have an impact. Should I repeat the

figures? 500 million people. For thousands of years. Do you think Hudson River is clean? Well, New York City is only 400 years old. Would you ever swim in the waters of Venice? Less than half a million people are reliant on its canals.

Infrastructure is another part of the equation. The British set up various textile and mining factories along the Ganges basin. These industries often discharged untreated waste and pollutants into the river. Urbanization led to increased sewage and waste disposal into the river from the most underdeveloped and poorest parts of those cities. This is the poison of imperialism. When it's not your land, you simply won't care about the impact of your actions. You don't have to consider externalities if you are so physically and emotionally removed from them.

Responsibility is shared here because once the British left, business went on as usual. Indians did nothing to changing existing practices in favor of environmental protection. For decades, corrupt politicians didn't bother doing anything about it. Industrialists kept bribes flowing in to ensure sustainability laws wouldn't be enforced. They saw no value in educating the poorest Indians about hygiene and sanitation because they saw no value in those lower caste Indians.

I really need you to understand this. When you have a social hierarchy that exists for THOUSANDS of years. When that system convinces the people at the bottom that they are scum, that they are untouchable, that they are filth. When everyone else treats those people like filth for THOUSANDS of years. It shouldn't come as a surprise when those people have no sense of self-worth and live amongst filth itself. I don't care if you think I'm being harsh or if you think I'm making excuses. That's the abject truth.

In 2014, the Indian government launched the Namami Gange project, seeking to clean up and rejuvenate the river. It is one of the success stories of Modi's legacy. Modi even said it was his destiny to serve Ma Ganga to the Indian parliament after his first election. His administration has spent almost 3 billion USD towards this effort. The initiative is treated as an economic priority as much as an environmental one, since 40% of the country's population relies on this river. The rebirth of the Ganga reflects India's rebirth. They are parallel anecdotes about redemption and untapped potential. The nearly extinct Ganga River Dolphin has been reported in record numbers in recent years. Although still endangered, some conservationists believe their population will double from 2021 to 2030. It's a hopeful sign for the future of the river.

I dip my ankles in the ice-cold river. It's said that these waters purify the spirit. I feel calm and at peace. I take the opportunity to contemplate in my time in India. I will commence my climb into the mountains tomorrow, to the sleepy hill station town of Mussoorie. Aside from some hiking, there's nothing on the agenda. I want to soak in all the tranquility. Do some self-care, maybe visit a spa. This part of India is known for Ayurveda, a 3,000-year-old wholistic healing system using organic herbal materials indigenous to this land. Neem for skincare. Turmeric to fight inflammation. Tulsi for allergy relief. Ashwagandha for sleep. These are just a few examples. You won't be hearing from me until this weekend when I return to Mumbai. My final weekend in India.

Mumbai (finale)

Sunday, 1:11 AM

Reporting live from the Taj Palace Mumbai, Room 261. It's my last night in town. My last night on this journey. All that separates me from this moment and my regular life is half a night's sleep and a 17 hour flight. But there's no rest for the wicked. Not tonight. I'm lucid, and there's work to be done.

Being here in this room is a personal dream come true for me. This is my favorite hotel in the world and in my opinion, truly one of the best as well. It's because this place transcends being a hotel. It is a cultural icon. A national monument.

There are 2 hotels at this property. First, the 120 year old Taj Palace, the one you're probably more familiar recognizing with its legendary 19th century Indo-Anglo colonial architecture. Old world, analog, a gemstone heritage and history. The second is the state of the art Taj Tower. Contemporary, digital, classy. They are both excellent, you can't possibly go wrong. Choose your own adventure.

I'd recommend the Palace if you're visiting for the first time. There is a spiritual essence that permeates every inch of this building. Most modern hotels, though well intentioned with all their amenities, create a frustratingly complicated labyrinth that becomes a nuisance to navigate. To get lost at the Taj Palace on the other hand, is a true privilege. What will you stumble upon this time? The tiniest details unlock hidden stories.

It's the knowledge that you are a part of history, part of the rich legacy held within these walls. In 120 years, imagine the names, the stories, the lives of the people who stayed in the very room that you are. Wow man....goosebumps.

The stars aligned for me and they upgraded my room to the Spanish suite. There are 44 suites in total at this hotel, each with a wholly unique inspiration and design. I have to say right up front that my opinions are no way shaped by this gesture. I'm a nobody and they don't know me. They had no knowledge of my intentions to write this. I would still feel the same way if it didn't happen. The reason being, it's not about the room. It's not about the paintings, the rugs, the perfectly manicured Makrana marble floors, the omnipresent arches, the Jharokha facade windows, the staircase (ohmygod that staircase), the chandeliers, or any other of the original furnishings that I could nerd out over. It's not about the amazing food, or the pool that somehow simultaneously feels like a secluded tropical island and in the middle of everything. It's not about the hundreds of tiny details I could spend another 1,000 words writing about.

No.

It's the people.

Can we be honest? Increasingly, the world is in short supply of people who do the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do. It takes special people to make a special place come to life. Otherwise, it's just a museum. The Taj brand name is one of the strongest in India. There's a level of excellence that is customary across all of their properties because that level of hospitality is deeply embedded within its ethos.

That ethos was tested on the night of November 26, 2008. 10 armed gunmen from the Pakistani based militant group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, laid siege on the hotel as part of a series of coordinated terrorist attacks. This historic landmark was a battleground between the terrorists, Mumbai police, and Indian special forces for nearly 2 and a half days. When the 60 hours of gunshots, explosives, a fire, and hostage rescue missions came to an end, a total of 31 civilians had been reported dead. 11 of these victims were hotel staff, who, in a moment of crisis, put the lives and safety of guests before themselves. Kitchen staff formed human shields to protect vulnerable patrons. The cleaning crew, in the middle of the siege, went door to door without any protection or cover to knock on doors and inform residents to lock up and stay in their rooms. These sacrifices were not made because Taj employees were exploited by capitalism. These were sacrifices made by courageous Indians who understood they were responsible for keeping people safe however they could. A story written by Rohit Deshpande and Anjali Raina of the Harvard Business Review estimates that the Taj Mumbai staff helped evacuate over 1,000 people to safety that night.

We can never take selfless, heroic acts like this for granted. Not in a time when we've seen literal police officers fail to intervene when school children are being killed. There are many stories of bravery from that night. To highlight one would be a disservice to the rest. I would encourage you to read about it, watch one of the several movies made on the subject, or come here and experience this place for yourself.

The Taj Mumbai is a special place with special people. They are representative of the best of this country. Even the simplest requests are responded to with the most generous and thoughtful actions that exceeded your expectations. If you are ever rude to the staff here, it's probably your fault, and they should throw you out headfirst like Uncle Phil would do in the Fresh Prince of Bel Air.

It's hard to believe my time in India has come to an end already. There are so many things I left on the table. So many tales that still need to be told. They will have to wait until next time. For now, I leave you with the final contradictions of this story. How I feel about this country.

Within and Without.

Until now, every time I came to India, I came as an American. That's how I felt and that's how I was made to feel. Every single person I interacted with this time made me feel like someone returning home, despite my broken Hindi and obviously naive

unfamiliarities. This land will always be a part of me. I feel an even stronger responsibility to be an advocate for India in any way I can. With that being said, what this trip has confirmed to me is that I am an American at the end of the day. And I'm equally proud of that as well. The road to progress is uneven, arduous, and painful. It's very easy for me to come back after a decade and have a rosy outlook because I haven't experienced those growing pains on a firsthand basis.

If you are an Indian American reading this right now, never forget that you won the lottery of birth to be where you are. Of course you worked hard, of course it was competitive, but we were born into a higher caste that allowed those opportunities to exist. You don't just get to turn away and pretend now. Racism towards India and Indians is only likely to get worse over the course of my life. The more India develops, the larger role it will command on the international stage. In America, it's less about the volume of Indians, and more about the disproportionate amount of wealth and influence we hold. We are the highest earning ethnic group, overrepresented in Congress, and hold key executive positions in some of the world's most powerful companies. All of that will come at a price.

If you are Indian American, I would encourage you to come back here as often as possible and as much as possible. Reconnect with any family you have here. It's so important to keep those relationships alive. Teach your kids about where their family came from. Recipes, languages, do what you can to preserve them. Tell your children about all the pride and all the pain. You must prepare them. Their peers may not understand, but it's essential for them to. Fill them with honor and with a sense of duty. We might not be Indian, but India belongs to us too. We are just as responsible for its growth. Tell me this. When people around the world see videos of unsanitary conditions and starving children, do you think they separate you from that because you're a Brahman? Or because you drive a Tesla? Of course not. Come back to reality. No one eats until we all eat.

Pride and Compunction.

To everyone else, everything they say about India is true. This country isn't for beginners. It's not for everyone. If you aren't willing or able to look beyond surface level impressions, don't come here. You won't understand, and that's okay. However, if you are the kind of person who craves an adventure, go to India. If you are energized by overstimulation, go to India. If you want to live amongst tribes in the jungle then stay in the most luxurious hotels you've ever seen in the same week, go to India. If you want to live in the space age and the stone age at the same time, go to India. If you want experience scores of different cultures and every possible landscape in one country, go to India. I say all of this with the utmost sincerity. There's an ancient, otherworldly wisdom of this culture that modern science is only beginning to understand. Concepts like Vedic Astrology, Yoga, Transcendental Meditation, and Ayurveda. I read the other day that the Fibonacci sequence, an essential formula for pattern recognition and coding software, was first discovered by an Indian mathematician named Acharya

Pingala in 200 BCE. That was about 1400 years before Leonardo Fibonacci was born. I'm extremely proud of my heritage. Even more so after this journey.

And yet, I have to tell you how else I feel. I wouldn't feel comfortable if my sister was traveling in India alone. It breaks my heart to say, but it's just raw honesty. Then again, I suppose I would feel uncomfortable with her traveling alone in most places. That's the sad thing to admit. You may have read the story from the state of Jharkhand about the tourist couple traveling around India earlier this year. The wife was raped by 3 men who then assaulted her husband when he came to her defense. Sexual violence is still a significant problem in India. I can give you context to poverty and pollution. I can only offer outrage and bewilderment that marital rape is still legal here.

I asked several different people on this journey about what happened in Jharkhand and everyone had a similar response. They all acknowledged India had a problem, but everyone was quick to assure me that "it wasn't us, it was them". If you ask someone from South India, they will tell you rape only happens in the North. If you ask a Hindu, they'll tell you it's only a problem amongst Muslims. If you ask a Muslim, he'll reciprocate. If you ask the old, they will blame the youth. If you ask well intentioned, they will blame the uneducated. That's it. That's the reality. And I mean....think about it. We're doing that right now as well aren't we? We are sitting here and discussing this from the perspective of the Western world and simply relegating the accountability of addressing rape culture to India. Despite knowing what we know about the way things are in America. Where are women truly safe? Not in college campuses. Not in corporate boardrooms. There's a lot we need to be honest about if we are to right these wrongs.

The problem with viewing the world through a binary lens of developed vs undeveloped is that you create an ideological dead end. Essentially, what you're suggesting is that once a country's GDP exceeds a certain threshold, once you've built enough roads, bridges, and airports, you have finished. There's nothing more to strive for. Sometimes I don't know if India is becoming more like America or America is becoming more like India. Perhaps both. Is it fair that the average Indian is judged by the conditions of its most destitute citizens? Should the average American be judged by the hordes of toothless fentanyl addicts who piss themselves to sleep in Philadelphia every night? Probably not. But it doesn't matter. Politicians did not care about the poorest Indians until they were shamed into it. The rich and middle class did not care about the poorest Indians until they were shamed into it. We as Indians point the finger everywhere else but ourselves for the reality of things. I'm sorry, but the caste system was in place long before the Mughals arrived. Long before the British even began overseas exploration. So if India needs to be shamed into a future where even the lowest common denominator lives a life of dignity and respect, so be it. I'll wear that. I won't fight it. All of us will have to. There is a difference between tough love and self-hate. Never ever forget that.

Cautious and Hopeful.

Sometimes, the world just doesn't feel like a big place anymore. The masses are in a race to achieve monoculture. Everyone wants to watch Netflix and drink Starbucks and wear Jordans. As much as we can do in good faith, we should be extremely thankful that there's no place on Earth like India. Imagine if the ancient Egyptians were around today. Imagine they managed to survive thousands of years of change, conflict, and conquest. Yes, of course they would need to modernize and assimilate. But we would look at them with a certain level of respect for simply keeping aspects of their culture and identity alive throughout that time. My biggest concern for this country is that it is conscious of what is worth carrying in the future, and what should be left behind. The India of the future should be defined by how Indian desire it to be, not by how it believes the rest of the world desires it to be.

I believe in the future of India, not because of Modi or the BJP. I believe in the future of India because I believe in the people who've crossed my path while I've been here. I believe in Govindji, my guide across Uttarakhand. I believe in Mohammad, the young videographer from Mumbai who helped me edit the trailer for this essay. I believe in Sweetie, the poolside attendant at the Taj Mumbai who shared many profound and interesting conversations with me. I believe in my cousins and family members who hustle every day to find their slice of The Indian Dream. 65% of this country's population is under the age of 35. The median age in India is 29, which is almost 10 years younger than that of America and China's. They should never put a ceiling on the idea of what's possible. The future belongs to them.

- Rebanta Mukherjee