

The Elephanta Suite

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Three stories loosely interconnected exploring Western visitors confronting India. You read about India, preferably written by Indian writers from an Indian perspective, thereby hoping to get if not necessarily a true picture at least an authentic one. You visit India, and you get a totally different picture. So many obvious things are not at all touched upon in the Indian literature or by Indians writing about India. Poverty say, what shocks a Western visitor, at least initially (getting used to it is a process of disturbing swiftness and ease), is almost never mentioned, along with many other details that are bound to catch the attention of a Westerners. Indian writers may be authentic, but surely they are not presenting the truth, at least not the whole truth. You read them again, thinking that having been exposed to India, you are now in a better position to read between the lines, only finding yourself as stymied as ever. What strikes you about India makes no dent in the authentic account. Are we missing something, or perhaps more to the point are the Indians missing something about their country?

Paul Theroux is a Western visitor. He is also what is known as a 'world-traveller', used to scouring the earth, getting around in strange foreign places, and thus his nose close to the ground, paying a lot of attention to those details necessary for travel survival. Thus he knows what Western tourists are bound to notice, what looms large from their particular perspectives. Hence reading his stories involve the innocent pleasure of recognition. Yes, true, I know about that, that too I have encountered. That is the backdrop of the stories, their claim for authenticity. The authenticity of the world of the reader.

The first story is about a wealthy couple in their upper middle age. They are in the pleasant stage of life in which the responsibilities of raising a family have been dispensed with, and the decrepitude of old age not yet a factor. It is a a kind of Indian summer, vestiges of youth are still present, darkened only, and thus set in relief by the prospects of the future. At sixty you can no longer pretend you are young, you have a period of grace. Ten years, maybe fifteen, before it will be all over, and all you can hope for is to linger. If you have been lucky, you may also have made yourself financially secure. You can roam and do all those things you dreamt about in your youth, except you are not young anymore, the gratifications are coming so to speak a bit too late in the day. Old age should be cushioned in memories. Memories you make when you are young, memories made when you are old are brittle, they do not adhere really to your identity, they are the first to flake off, when your mind start to soften. So the couple are spending time in a luxurious Spa, protected from the harsh reality of India, by all what their money can buy. Splendid isolation, attentive staff willing to pander to your whims, you have no care in the world. In fact the world cares for you, offer you various wonderful things, including temptations, sexual temptations. Both the husband and the wife succumb to those temptations, without actually consummating them, yet they have somehow transgressed. Suddenly they are shunned by the staff, they are denied extension of their stay, in spite of the fact that the

spa seems not at all fully booked. They are almost hounded away, not driven off in style, but chauffeured by a doctor in his private car. They go astray, meet a frenzied mob, and are stoned to death. A fitting end perhaps, but is it foreordained or just a matter of bad luck. The author seems to suggest that they are simply getting their just desserts. But how is this really brought about. Is it true that Indians have a very low tolerance for the misbehaving of foreign tourists? Should they not have other things to worry about.

The second story is a bit more interesting and original. It is about a top lawyer being sent to India on assignment, helping to exploit the almost unlimited potential of making money. At first he is aghast, he wants to minimize his exposure to India to the extreme. Holing out in his suit in the Taj Mahal hotel, avoiding eating the local food, spending all his time awake in board-meetings during which he tries to speak as little as possible, thereby maintaining his power, because after all power is in the eye of the beholder. And then suddenly something changes. He discovers sex. Sex in very young women, or at least so he rationalizes it. He is in fact a pedophile. He is presented as a shy sympathetic character, and his very revelation of sex is even shown in a somewhat sympathetic manner. His pursuit of children is contrasted against his encounter with a crafty woman who wants him to seduce her, but to do this through a prolonged game. He is filled with revulsion against her shallowness and greediness, yet he is erotically drawn to her, but not strongly enough to enter the game. In fact we are told by the author that our protagonist has always taken no for an answer in all erotic negotiations, as a consequence he has known very few women, although he is over forty. His most serious entanglement resulting in marriage also quickly deteriorated into divorce within months. We are clearly being set up the classic case of a man unable to relate to mature women seeking innocence and trust in children. Yet, in spite of himself, the author cannot really not like his character, and instead of having him come to a sorry end, he is shipped off to some ashram, by his Indian subordinate, who slowly but surely has usurped his power and turned the tables on him. We are not sorry, but rather glad that he will now be taken care of and giving the opportunity to repent his sins.

The third story is by far the weakest in the collection. A young woman traveling alone after having been dumped by her pretty companion. This is going to be a true adventure for her, unencumbered by company, free to follow her whims. She takes the train down to Bangalore, meets a fat Indian guy on the train, who gives her his business-card. He is about to get a job in the outsourced call-service. She seeks out an ashram, but being bored with the cloisterly atmosphere centered around a charismatic guru, she contacts her train companion, gets a part time job as a teacher of American English, having a most responsive class. She lives in two worlds, and between them there is the Elephant with its mahomet, both of whom she befriends on her commute from one world to the other. The fat guy is in her class, and he is by far the most receptive student. He also starts to have designs on her. Then she decides to go to Madras (for some reason the name 'Chennai' is not used, although this seems a far more commonly accepted usage than 'Mumbai' for Bombay) and the sea-shore temples in Mahabalipuram. Doing so gets her in disfavor both with her employers at Civic-Tech and the Ashram. She goes anyway. American women are not supposed to be cowed by restrictions. On the train her fat suitor turns up in the same compartment. She tries to escape him, but he gets on the same bus. There is a pit

stop and she takes a taxi, he follows in another one, and eventually rapes her, or at least violates her. She reports it, justice is to be meted out, but its course is being delayed. The point of the Indian justice system is to create obstacles. She is cajoled and threatened by representatives of the fat boy and his family. She refuses to budge. In the meantime expelled from the ashram she has sought refuge by the Elephant and his keeper and his wife. They know no English, but they have an educated daughter who has left home, and thus created a niche in which she can fit. As a last resort of deliverance, she tricks the fat boy to meet her. The elephant is in musth, she lets him loose on the boy trampling him to death. Satisfying maybe, but the sympathies of the reader have been much more attached to the elephant than to any of the protagonists of the story, so the last thought and worry a reader has closing the book, is what is going to happen to the Elephant?

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