

HUMBLER THAN DUST
A Retired Couple Visits the Real India
by Tandem Bicycle



—— Segment not cycled
----- Route cycled

HUMBLER THAN DUST

A Retired Couple Visits the
Real India by Tandem Bicycle



by Mona Lee

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Humbler Than Dust,
A Retired Couple Visits the Real India by Tandem Bicycle by Mona Lee

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CHAPTER 1



Touts and Beggars

My husband, Dick, is a handsome gray-haired mathematician with an imperturbable disposition and the well tuned body of a cyclist. However, at two AM after twenty-five hours on a passenger jet to Bombay, he looks as frazzled and confused as a robot whose wires have shorted out. Tugging our big heavy suitcase and wearing an enormous backpack, he stumbles past the booth marked, *Pre-paid taxis 650 Rupees* and steps onto the pavement outside the terminal.

I too must look as I feel, even more dazed and out of sorts than Dick. Having been a bicycle commuter before retiring from my job as a social worker, I am also normally in pretty good shape, but at this moment I am the stereotype of a senior citizen tourist, a snowy headed old lady with sagging cheeks and wrinkled brow. “Oh yes, maybe there are taxis waiting outside that charge less,” I say. For our lay-over last night in Bangkok, the taxi service inside the terminal had tried to charge us twice the going rate outside.

“Our guide book says the taxi fare downtown should be three-fifty,” Dick remembers. But I also recall that the book warns against touts who scam gullible tourists in numerous, creative ways like taking them to expensive hotels for kickbacks. We are both cost-conscious because we finance our *Bike for Global Democracy* trips

entirely from our modest pensions. We have already trained ourselves to mentally calculate the exchange rate of rupees to dollars. Six hundred fifty rupees translates to around thirteen dollars, about the price of a taxi ride from the Seattle airport to our home. However, we have been told that India would be cheaper.

The Bombay terminal with its gray, functional walls and stone tile flooring dredges up early childhood memories of bus stations during the late 1940's when the U.S. was emerging from the Depression. To reach the squat toilets in the restroom, I had stepped over women in saris asleep on the floor. Now I hesitate at the lobby exit and shuffle out with Dick into the equally uninviting street. There is no one else waiting, and there are no taxis. All is still and dark except for a couple of spotlights hanging from the edge of a building across the way.

Suddenly a man is standing in front of us, then two, then three. We can barely see them in the ambient light. The first man is chubby and wears a filthy turban wound like a dish cloth around his oily black hair and scraggly, frosted beard. The second man is even dirtier. Instead of on his head, he wears the dish cloth draped over his stomach and hanging down in front. This must be a dhoti, or sort of skirt worn by men. I remember reading about that in the guidebook. The third man has a crew cut. He wears a plain T-shirt and a pair of tattered jeans. The three of them stand abreast forming a black wall of silhouettes between us and the spotlights.

"Taxi!" says the man in the turban.

"You need hotel!" says the man in the T-shirt.

"I get taxi," insists the man in the dhoti and runs off into the dark street.

"There don't seem to be any taxis waiting here like there were in Bangkok," I say.

"We get taxi. Take you to good hotel," assures the turbaned man.

"We have reservations at Bentley's Guest House in Colaba," says Dick.

"Oh that is far. We go hotel very near."

"No, we want to go to Colaba," says Dick.

The man shakes his turban. "Long way. Cost many rupees."

“How many rupees?”

The men do not reply. They stand like silent sentries guarding us as if to prevent our escape. In fact, when I try to walk around them, the turbaned man holds out his arm like a barrier at a railroad crossing and insists, “We get you taxi!”

“Why are there no taxis in front of the terminal?” asks Dick. “Where are they?”

“Taxis not allowed waiting in terminal. Must go out for taxi.”

“Then we’ll go out and get one,” says Dick. He tries to walk around the two men, but the man in the dhoti comes panting back. “Taxi! We have taxi!” he calls.

“How much, what cost to Colaba, three hundred fifty rupees?” Dick asks.

Without answering, the three men literally grab our luggage away from us and start running off into the darkness. We have little choice but to chase after them or lose our luggage.

About a half block down the street waits a rattle trap beige car, much like the Studebaker my Dad junked back in the fifties. The three men stuff our luggage into the trunk and open the back door, motioning for us to get in.

“Something is creepy about this,” I say to Dick. We both hesitate before getting in, but what choice do we have? As far as we can tell there is no other candidate to take us to Bentley’s in Colaba, and it is now past two AM. We get in slowly, our bottoms feeling metal beneath the burlap bags which serve as upholstery for this questionable rig.

“Where is the driver?” asks Dick, observing that there is no one in the driver’s seat.

The turbaned man gets in. “I am driver,” he says.

“This is pretty fishy,” I point out.

“What cost to Colaba?” persists Dick.

“We charge night time rates, very far, very expensive.” The turbaned man presses a switch to awaken a grumbling engine, and we jerk away from the terminal building.

About a quarter of a mile farther on, the terminal complex exits onto a traffic circle. There we notice a queue of taxis waiting alongside of the road. They have official black logos and look to be in far

better shape than the vehicle we're in. I figure they're probably waiting to be called from the prepaid six-fifty taxi stand inside the terminal. I want to go back and start all over using that method, but I'm pretty sure Dick would not agree to six-fifty. "What cost to Colaba?" he asks again.

"Tell us the cost now or take us back to the airport!" I demand, my voice rising to crescendo.

"Long way to Colaba," says the turbaned man. He shows us a printed fare schedule. "Night time rates. Cost is twenty-one hundred rupees."

"Take us back to the airport at once!" I shriek.

"Take us back now, or let us off right here" agrees Dick. "We won't pay that. The prepaid cost is only six hundred fifty rupees."

"Okay, six-fifty," says the turbaned man.

"No, take us back to the airport!" I shout. I'm not about to trust this scoundrel to take us across the street, let alone all the way to Colaba, wherever that is.

I'm feeling pretty panicky by now. Here we are an older couple who have clearly been targeted by scam artists because we look bumbling and inexperienced. We are alone in a huge foreign country where we don't know more than three or four words of any native language. Our limited knowledge has been gleaned from a few guide books and several conversations with friends before we left our home in Seattle. Yet we are daring to take a thousand kilometer tandem bicycle trip, launching out on our own across an unknown land. What kind of quixotic dreamers are we anyway to presume that we can traipse about the world promoting the idea of a global parliament elected by the people if we can't even get a taxi from the airport?

A retired co-worker, Rani, had grown up in India and still partakes almost exclusively of Indian culture within her small local immigrant community. When I told Rani we were planning a bicycle trip in India, she said, "No! You cannot bicycle in India. That's absurd! It's out of the question!"

"Well, we're going to do it," I said. "We already have our airplane tickets and have told all our friends."

"You must be crazy!" she said.

“Why?”

“The roads are very bad. Trucks and buses will run you over.”

Another young friend named Timothy had spent a couple of months in an ashram learning meditation from a guru. As we sipped lattes in a Seattle coffee house, Timothy had given us two pieces of advice. He said, “Remember you are a wallet, not a person.” After a couple of more sips, he added, “Never expect anything to go smoothly while you’re in India.”

My friend Joan, another former co-worker, had taken a series of two-week trips to visit her guru. Joan’s advice had been mostly medical. “Don’t drink any water unless it is bottled and be sure you break the seal yourself.”

“Also, make sure you get traveler’s medical insurance. If something serious happens, you will want to be evacuated to a hospital in Germany. Medical care in India is very poor.”

“Oh, and bring your own disposable syringes. They just wash things. They don’t sterilize.”

A world traveler peace activist friend named Mike had shuddered visibly and said, “India is very ugly.” Then his face had relaxed into a sad smile. “Very ugly and very beautiful.”

These variable claims about India had echoed through the chambers of my mind as we peered down over the wing of Northwest Flight 7 taking off from Seatac International Airport and heading out across Puget Sound. Below we could see the U.S. Naval Submarine Base at Bangor, and we even located the little green meadow with our vacation cottage overlooking Hood Canal and the snow-covered Olympic Mountains. Dick had pointed out some of our favorite hiking destinations — Quillicene, Cameron Pass, the Elwha River Valley, and Hurricane Ridge. We had such a good life in Washington State. Why were we headed off against the advice of friends to be strangers in an unknown world?

Dick’s normally gentle voice is now raised to its most assertive volume. “Take us back to the airport now!” he insists.

The turbaned man drives twice around the traffic circle while trying to convince us to trust him and that he will only charge six hundred and fifty rupees.

“No! Take us back!” I reach for the door handle as if I intend to jump out onto the traffic circle.

To our relief, after the third pass around the circle, the car rumbles back toward the terminal where we get out, and the turbaned man helps us unload our luggage. By this time he is peering quizzically at us as if wondering what we plan to do next.

Actually, it had been my plan to go in and order a prepaid taxi for six hundred fifty rupees, but Dick dons his pack and begins to pull the heavy suitcase back toward the traffic circle. “There was a whole bunch of taxis along the road out there. We’ll get one for three fifty,” declares this brave soul.

I have no choice but to pick up my luggage and follow. Although Dick has the heaviest pieces, mine are by no means insignificant. Dick is pulling the big wheeled suitcase containing our entire disassembled *Bike Friday* custom travel tandem bicycle. What few parts he had been unable to fit into the suitcase are stored in the enormous backpack with his clothing and personal items. Most of my things are packed in a big green duffle bag which hangs down the front of my chest by a strap across my shoulder. I also wear a small backpack of books and supplies I wanted to keep handy on the plane. Dangling from each hand is a pair of bicycle panniers containing our helmets and water bottles. Sweating under the yoke of these burdens, we trudge into a strange dark world.

We have not gone far before one of the black, more official looking taxis pulls up beside us and stops. The driver jumps out. “Taxi?”

“Yes, taxi,” I say.

“How much to Colaba? Three hundred fifty rupees?” says Dick.

“Four hundred.”

“Let’s pay four hundred,” I urge, and fortunately Dick agrees.

As the taxi races through the darkened streets, I perceive Bombay as an unlikely tourist destination. The roadsides are lined with corrugated metal squares that look like small garage doors. Sometimes the taxi goes over a viaduct and I can see the upper stories of concrete or stucco apartment buildings with blackened and crumbling facades. Here and there human forms crouch over smoking fires along the street, or people sleep on blankets in the open air. Gar-

bage, plastic bags, tin cans and paper wrappers cover every inch of ground. The air blasting my face through the open window smells like a blend of metallic smoke and sewage.

Perhaps this spectacle of pollution and litter should not come as such a shock. I should have anticipated this natural consequence of combining corporate industrialization with overpopulation and extreme poverty. After all, the relatively poor southeast Seattle neighborhood where I live is a lot more littered than wealthier suburbs. Poor people are focused on the mechanics of survival and have spare attention or resources to expend on careful disposal, let alone recycling, of coke bottles and junk food packaging.

* * * *

As I clutch Dick's arm to brave the humbling experience of sightseeing on our first day in old Bombay, we are surrounded by what were probably once magnificent streetscapes, like something out of Venice. There are pointed arches over windows and tile patterns gracing the facades of towers and onion domes. But buildings are crumbling away under improvised additions like awnings made of rusty tin roofing or deteriorating straw mats for window dressings. Ferns and saplings grow out of cracks high in the outer walls. Memory of the British occupation must be so bad that people watch gleefully as remnants of European culture crumble back into the dust.

Sightseeing is seriously hampered by the chaos of traffic. I feel that we are in a transmigration of ants besieged by an aggressive swarm of hungry beasts known as auto rickshaws. People don't walk much on sidewalks here. Instead they prance down the middle of the street, even as rickshaws and motorcycles flit every which way through, around, and about them. It's not just the engines; it's the cacophony of honking, shrieking, and trumpeting horns as well. Drivers don't form lanes here — they just swerve and honk. There needs to be a method whereby an oncoming motorist warns another that he's being overtaken, so they use their horns incessantly. I give up on my hearing aids and store them inside my pack.

This custom of sauntering down the middle of the street in the midst of chaos is perfectly plausible, given the millions of pedestrians and very little usable sidewalk space. It appears that someone,

perhaps the British, back some time ago did build lots of beautiful sidewalks, graceful promenades constructed of artistic paving stones in various geometric shapes. Now most of the stones are missing as clouds of orange dust billow out into the air already heavily polluted with auto exhaust and factory smoke. These dust paths are flanked on either side by vendor stalls stacked and hung with everything from colorful silks to radios to food being deep-fried right there on the spot. If you do try and make your way down the narrow dusty path between the stalls, you are constantly pounced upon by vendors, called wallahs. "Ice cream, Madame!" "Nice pair of sandals, best quality! Good price!" At least in the middle of the street you only have to contend with traffic and can maintain a safer distance from wallahs who want your wallet.

Crossing at a busy intersection, I suddenly feel the touch of a tiny hand holding mine way down low at the end of my arm. I look down and see a little brown boy with bright pleading eyes gazing up at me. He is covered with grime, and a wad of yellow mucous runs down his nose into his mouth. He is about the size of an average North American preschooler, but there is an air of far greater sophistication about him. Startled, I pull my hand away and reach up to take hold of Dick's arm. We have already been confronted by several begging children since leaving Bentley's Guest House this morning, but this is the first one to take my hand. I want very much to give him money, even to take him home with me perhaps, but Dick says it is wrong to give money to beggars.

"If you give them money, it rewards and therefore perpetuates the system."

"So, if you don't give them money will that change the system?"

"The children are only begging because their parents make them do it. India has free public schools. Children should be in school, not begging in the street. They would be fed at school and later learn a trade."

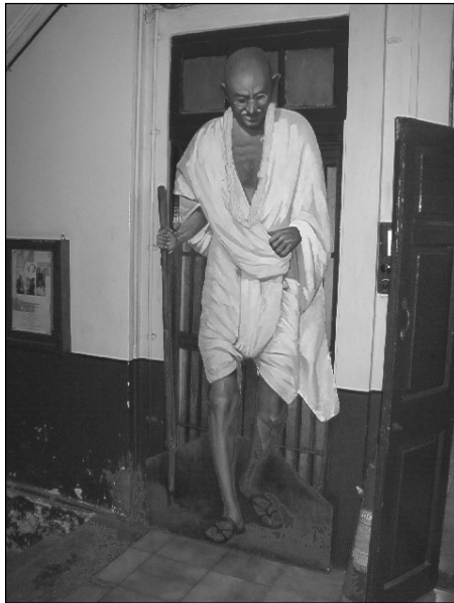
I try to soothe my conscience with Dick's argument as a pretty little girl looks up to me with pleading eyes and calls out, "Baksheesh!" which means beggar's money. It doesn't help. What helps is doing arithmetic. With so many begging children, if I gave each of them the least acceptable donation, say a few rupees; we

would have to cancel our trip. The shoe string upon which we are traveling would not stretch that far. Besides, I've been told that Hindus believe giving alms to beggars wins favor from the gods. If you give to a beggar, it's a gift to humanity. With so many Hindus around, maybe these youngsters will do a fairly brisk business without my patronage.

After lunch, we take a taxi ride over to Mani Bhavan, Gandhi's former home in Bombay, now a museum containing one of the largest collections of books and writings by and about him. Framed by one doorway is a life-sized photo of the great man wearing his simple dhoti and soft peaceful smile. The portrait is so realistic that the resurrected Mahatma appears to be striding into the library with his walking stick at this very moment. I sit at the table near his picture reading the thoughts of this grand soul and imagining a very different world transformed by a universal commitment to his teachings.

Dick, who was a conscientious objector during the Viet Nam War, shows me a copy of the book that most influenced his youth

and turned him into the abstemious vegetarian peace activist that he has been ever since. The book is entitled, *Experiments in Truth, an Autobiography*. As I sit in the room that was once Gandhi's study reading the introduction to his autobiography, one quote takes hold of my mind, to say nothing of my nose, throat, and lungs, perhaps my whole being. "The seeker after truth," he says, "Must be humbler than dust. Only then and not til then will he ever have a glimpse of truth."



Life-sized photo of Gandhi in Mani Bhavan, his former home in Bombay.