

INDIA

Fred Truman was a runaway fast bowler for England in the 60's. He was a colourful character and over the years he was often sought after as a guest speaker for his wit and humorous stories. On one occasion he addressed the British Press Club talking about the many countries he had visited whilst playing cricket. The paraphrase went something like this: "..... and then you go to India –*once!* They've got deadly sea snakes over there, and after a few days, you go looking for one. Their curries are so hot that you walk around with the cheeks of your bum so tight, you couldn't get a tram ticket up it." He then went on to explain about his first tour game and how he opened the bowling at one end. At the change of the opening over, his partner 'Goba' marked his run-up and began his approach to the wicket. To the surprise of everyone he passed the umpire in his delivery stride and raced passed the startled batsman at the other end "gathering momentum as he went". He was last seen leaving third man behind and disappearing up the player's tunnel. Eventually, the captain followed him in and yelled out? "Where are you Goba?" "I'm over here" a voice was heard. "And where's here?" The captain impatiently asked. "In the toilet, as a matter of fact, I've sh.. t.. myself" the distressed reply came. "OK but can we have the ball back, we want to get on with the game", the captain admonished.

Anyone who has ever been to India, can relate to this story. While it is one of the most fascinating countries to visit anywhere in the world, health problems are a constant concern. Jaundice, TB, parasites, infections, contaminated water and food – India seems to have it all. I found myself in Calcutta in 1977 doing volunteer work. It was once the capital of India until 1912 and these days the population could be as high as 20 million. Your initiation begins by landing at Dum Dum International Airport, so named because of the Dum Dum bullet which was produced there, but was soon outlawed by all countries since the object of its invention was to explode inside the body of the victim.

Soon I was taken by rickshaw 'taxi' to my abode which was an orphanage located on the outskirts of the city. India's version of the rickshaw involves a sinewy man pulling a black buggy through chaotic streets. Any discomfort you feel by sitting in it is tempered somewhat by the thought that this fare will help him eat tonight. Soon we arrived at the three-metre-high concrete wall which surrounded the orphanage. I was quite surprised to see a layer of broken glass imbedded around the top perimeter to discourage trespassing. Satu, the gate keeper, greeted me and led me into my new residence. He was a tall, lean, young man with obvious disabilities including the use of only one eye. His sole job was to live at the front entrance in his makeshift hut and admit only authorized people. As we approached the courtyard, about forty excited children ran to us but the only English word they could utter was "Uncle". They led me to the entrance of the building and like most, this one was two storied, battered, uncoloured and had a flat roof. Afterwards, it was no surprise to be shown to my living quarters which was a shared floor space with no electricity. As you can imagine, 38 degrees, 95% humidity and no fan, don't go together too well for human beings.

It wasn't long before I became settled; not many visitors could say 'feel at home' in a place like Calcutta. I could see that language was going to be a problem, so I became friendly with some of the Anglo Indians at the local church. One evening I was invited to share a curry meal. It turned out to be quite mild by Indian standards and we had a fun night. When it was time to leave, I was a little concerned that the gate would be closed when I returned to the orphanage. Phillip Luther, my host, said, "Just say – 'there was a brown crow!' It's extremely close to the Bengali phrase for *open the gate*. With this in mind, I walked back through the frenzied streets

and approached the large metal confronting gate. I called out “Hey, Satuthere was a brown crow” to which I was met with silence. I then cranked my voice up a notch and cried earnestly: “Satu there was a brown crow”. Again, I detected no reaction from across the barrier. Finally, in mild desperation thinking I could be left on the streets of Calcutta for the night, I yelled “Satu, open the bloody gate!” to which he immediately responded and let me in.

There were about thirty young Bengalis in the same house as me who were members of the Missionaries of Charity – the male version of Mother Teresa’s order. Each day they would walk the streets and the railway stations helping the neediest which to me seemed to be just about everybody. We had our main meal in the evening consisting of a large container of boiled rice. Everybody scooped a portion into an enamel plate, topped it with vegetable curry and a yellow soup called ‘dahl’. Dessert was a single banana. After a few nights of this, I decided to liven up the meal with a trick I had leant from Gyan, my friend from the Indian State of Bihar. Before we sat down to eat, I obtained one of the bananas and proceeded to use a needle and cotton thread passing it just under the skin in a circular manner until I came to the initial hole I started with. It was then a simple matter of pulling the two threads together. In this way the banana was cut in two without removing the skin. I repeated the process once more, thinking it would be enough without raising suspicion. Finally, I disguised the minute holes by lightly rubbing the sides of the banana and placed it where Jyoti Kumar, the leader of the community normally sat.

After prayers we made our way to the dining room which consisted of two sets of long wooden benches and a solitary table. Apart from these bare essentials, the room was empty, and I could see that the yellow flaky walls needed attention. On the table there was a huge bowl of steaming rice and bananas were set at convenient intervals along the rows. You’ll notice that there is no mention of cutlery because it is customary to eat in India with your ‘*left*’ hand; the right is always used for another purpose which saves you wasting money on Sorbent. After we sat down to eat, I listened intently to the Bengali language but failed to catch any hint of what they were talking about. All too soon the meal was over, and Jyoti reached for his banana. As he peeled away the skin it fell into three neat pieces on the table. While he was brown in complexion, I noticed him visibly loose colour. He politely pushed the banana aside and remained quiet for the rest of the meal. The next day I said to him, “Jyoti, are you alright?” Fortunately for me, he was the only one who could speak broken Indian English. “Oh, yes, verrrrr verrrry good”. I continued. “Last night I was concerned about you because you seemed to be a bit off colour at our evening meal.” He suddenly recalled his scare from the night before and said: “Oh, yes, evil spirits, not verrry good.” I owned up to my trickery and offered him my banana.

Kite flying was common in Calcutta, but they were usually no bigger than the size of a newspaper and hovered not far above the tops of the palm trees. I recalled the time when my uncle made a kite on the farm, and it was certainly a monster measuring about six feet in length. It had a wooded cross frame, was stabilised by a string boarder wound securely on each corner and covered in brown paper. The tail must have been at least 20 feet long and was weighted with a series of equally spaced screwed up newspaper. As a final touch we pasted cartoon characters on the face of the kite and prepared for the launch. It was quite exhilarating to see the kite majestically rise into the sky and soon we decided to add two more balls of string to its length. It was eventually so high that it was attacked by hawks and my uncle Jack fell over backwards from his vantage point on the woodheap in the excitement. We tied the kite to the fence and when my uncle Ballie came back from shopping, he said he could see it from the town which was about 5 miles away. After we watched enthralled for an hour as it ducked and

weaved across the sky, we decided to have some lunch. When we returned, we were only in time to see the string break and the kite making huge suicidal circles until it crashed in the far paddock about a mile away.

With this background in mind I decided to build a kite which all the orphan kids would remember for a long time. I secured a 6 foot long bamboo rod and constructed a cross piece in the form of a diamond, covered it with thick plastic and weighted the tail with newspaper. There's not much open space in Calcutta so I decided to launch it from the flat roof of the house where we all lived. By the time I reached the roof everyone was laughing at the idea that this monstrosity could possibly lift off. I got one of the kids to hold it and then I ran quickly across the roof which was a little more than a cricket pitch across. The 'big bird' rose momentarily and then nosedived in a very undignified exit to the ground below. By that stage a few hundred people had gathered in the street beyond the wall and the laughter was humiliating. But not to be beaten, I realised that the tail was far too light, so I attached a jumper to the end of the tail and went back to try again. We repeated the process, and I had socks on my hands to prevent being burnt by the string. This time the kite rose like a beauty, and I felt a warm glow of success. The string was racing through my fingers and the crowd below became hushed with admiration and surprise. In no time I had exhausted the string and carefully added two more balls as I had seen my uncle do years before, eventually securing that 'aeronautic giant' to the metal grate conveniently located in the centre of the roof. The kite was now tiny in the sky, but you could see the jumper zigzagging in wonderful loops. Triumphantly, I descended the stairs and went to lunch which was boiled rice and one banana as usual.

We couldn't wait to return to see how the kite was going but the memories came back to haunt me when I saw the string break and in no time at all my proud exhibit had disappeared over a hundred houses away. Desperately, a horde of kids all charged out the entrance with me, past a startled Satu, the gatekeeper, and down the street. Somehow, we managed to locate the string and we kept running and hauling it in as we went, but alas we felt a tug like a fish gives when it's hooked, and our kite was no more. We retrieved the now limp string and sighed that someone had made off with it.