

Only in India

It is a truism that India is a land of extremes. On one side of the street, in the savage sunlight, blues are bluer, pinks are pinker; on the other side those same colours are muted by grime and exhaust. The noisy bustle of the marketplace is balanced out by the sanctuary of the temple, quiet as the motes of dust that hang in the air. As a visitor, these are the juxtapositions that charm and intrigue me. It is a country where I can find myself oscillating from immense joy to immeasurable sadness in an instant.

I felt exhilarated driving around Mysore in our waspish tuk tuk. Its little engine screamed with each violent gear change and we cheated death, somehow squeezing between a decrepit bus and a brightly painted truck laden with watermelons. A brassy Ganesha charm hanging from the mirror, danced violently, protecting us as we swerved into the oncoming traffic on an insanely packed roundabout. Clinging on tightly, we rounded a corner and came to an abrupt stop in an unremarkable back street.

It was good to be alive. The blood coursed through my veins causing me to laugh in delight. Springing from the tuk tuk, I stepped back to record the journey in a photograph — and then it happened, I plummeted through a deep crack in the concrete at the side of the road into the abyss.

Now an Indian drain is not a western drain that carries away excess water. Oh no, no. An Indian drain is full of black slime; an oozing stream of fetid sludge. Think of a putrid camembert lurking in the back of the fridge, this was worse. Hell hath no stench to compare with that which I encountered seeping from the darkness below.

Years of yoga payed off and I found myself holding a modified warrior pose that allowed me some dignity. The trembling tour guide hauled me out of the pit, his brow uncreasing as I emerged more or less unscathed, but with my full-length, coral-pink skirt coated with something resembling sump oil. The noxious liquid dripped into a mandala around my tarred feet. I was mortified.

Feigning insouciance, I limped behind our guide until we stopped in front of a time-worn door. As it opened, the scent of sandalwood and jasmine wafted past me on a cloud of fine smoke, smothering the rankness in my nostrils; the glory of it had the aura of Ganga's shrine. We had arrived at a perfume factory — of course we had.

I was handed over to a delicate girl with clear mahogany eyes; she could not have been more than 14 years old. She wore a cerise nylon sari embroidered with white flowers studded with sequins; one of those seen in heaps in the market. Her usual job was rolling joss sticks, but today she given a less fragrant task. She led me to a tap embedded in the courtyard wall and began to wash me down. Her dignity humbled me. At first she was gentle, but then she took a huge bar of homemade soap and rubbed my legs, my feet, my skirt – as if kneading dough for chapattis. She breathed rapidly from the effort and her own clothes become soaked. The young girl avoided looking me in the eye, but her shy smile never left her lips. In time the water ran clear and I was cleansed. She stood me in front of the rotating fan in their workroom to dry.

The factory owner then took me by the elbow and led me into a room lit only by the shards of sunlight penetrating the slatted shutters. He chose a vial from one of the many on the shelves, opened it and rubbed the deep cut on the heel of my hand with lotus oil. "It is an antiseptic," he declared proudly, binding the cut while instructing me not to wash it for two days. "I am pleased to help you. You are welcome here". Before bidding me goodbye, he selected further flasks of oils and pushed them towards me, telling me to use them liberally.

I entered this building smelling of shit and came out smelling of roses, lotus flower, jacaranda, neroli and waterlily. Only in India.