



## THE FIRST DAY

Sunday, January 1, 2006 – Mumbai (India) Gateway of India

18.921753,72.833556

The water washes up softly against the stones: sleepy, undecided, as if the sea does not quite know how to treat the shore. A mild wind whistles along the edge of the sea, just sufficient to ruffle the feathers of the little sparrows flitting around, chirping quietly, from one algae nest to the next. Far above me a seagull swoops through the sky; closer, bats swing silently through the evening air with strong blows of their jagged wings. On the horizon it is gray upon gray: fishing boats and yachts anchored in gloom, lying noiselessly and patiently in wait of their owners, looking as if they have been forever trapped in this state. A ray of sun directs my gaze to a piece of shiny silver flotsam. Next, as if guided by an invisible hand, the long and curiously bared body of a dead moray glides into the scene. And then the first person appears. It is, how could it

be otherwise, a mussel collector. Slowly, he moves over the dark sea-bed laid bare by the ebbing waters. Utterly focused on the hunt he tip-toes past the small pools, squatting every now and again to carefully loosen a limpet from the pebbles before pushing it into the innards of his plastic bag. Suddenly he raises his head, smiles, waves to me, swings his bag against the sky and shakes the booty proudly. I wave back, but he does not see me. I am not the one meant. Others will eat the limpets with him. I turn around and, in a fraction of a second, the squealing and growling, whimpering and purring, chirping and hissing, croaking and chattering of thousands of human throats jolts me back into the waking world. Hundreds of small transistor radios rattle and rumble the electronic soul out of the body. Two-stroke engines rattle against the crunch



of sugarcane presses. Ice cream vendors are ringing for their lives. Metal spatulas let meat and eggs dance over glowing iron plates: Takatak, takatak, takatak. Pigeons are now swishing up in swarms from the square to the mighty triumphal arch that the British erected here as a symbolic gateway to India a hundred years earlier: a gray explosion in the air, a thunderous applause of wings.

I am at the Gateway of India. My first day on the subcontinent is groaning to an end. I have never seen so many people. I have never been confronted by so much poverty, never seen so much filth, so much visible disease, so many crippled people. Even the huge rats, frolicking between the huts, have their fur falling off in tatters. I've never before

been felt so revolted, never breathed such densely polluted air, never smelled such stench. And, above all, I have never experienced such constant noise, never witnessed such chaos and unrest everywhere, encompassing absolutely everything – shaking up the slumbering definitely, probably even the dead.

Perhaps I do not want to be here at all. Maybe I'm not ready yet. Maybe it's the wrong moment. How frivolous it was to fly to India. I have entered the door to a world about which there was not the faintest inkling in my soul, in my genes. Because none of my ancestors ever travelled so far. And I really do not know if I'm fit to be first.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.