



THE GREAT STEAM

Thursday, December 22, 2016 – Jodhpur (India) Nai Sarak

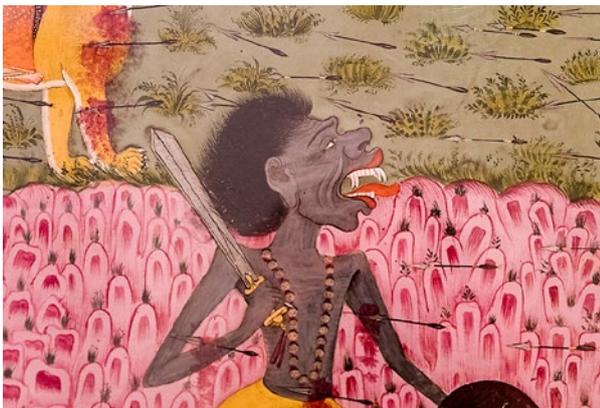
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There are few moments when I feel as lost as I do in an Indian bazaar. This has something to do with the truth that I cannot be a buyer and therefore not play a meaningful role here; after all, I do not need a diesel engine to drive my rice-mill or a rose-red mat for my bathroom. As a consequence, a thick «Gawker» is written on my forehead – and I am at best of interest to the spice traders. Though that's not quite the reason that I feel oddly uncertain here: as if I have not yet fully understood how the earth's gravity functions in this place.

I stand at Nai Sarak in Jodhpur, in front of the gateway to Ghanta Ghar square – which, with its tall Victorian-style clock-tower, is the ticking heart of Jodhpur's old town. The sun has just bid goodbye to a horizon of dense smog, and scattered street lamps form shiny dots in the milky purple haze

that it leaves behind. High above the flickering citylights, the mighty fort of Mehrangarh stands a-glow against the increasingly darkening sky. Mopeds, tuk-tuks, bicycles, and pedestrians bumble through the tall gate, which rises like a sign of order above the bustle. Handcarts laden with pomegranates, guavas, bananas or plastic utensils, squeeze through the heaving mass of humanity.

In a tiny stall across the street samosas are being fried in a one-yard-long cauldron; next to it a sugarcane press is in motion, spitting a couple of fibres into the air every now and again. Behind a dense hedge of parked motorcycles some old men are sitting in small armchairs in front of a coffee kitchen, sipping their sticky-sweet drink from espresso cups printed with sundry patterns. A jeans-seller hollers praises his fake brands to the skies. He has a beau-



tiful, high voice, and when he calls out «Levi's», «Lee», or «Diesel», it sounds almost like a liturgical hymn. But his alto is drowned out by the rattle of two-stroke engines, the wheeze of the nutcracker, the whistling of overheated motorcycle brakes – not to mention the ubiquitous vehicle horns, the shrill tones of which pierce through the soundscapes of Indian streets like arrows in the body of Saint Sebastian or the bodies felled by the blood-thirsty Goddess Kali in combat with an army of demons. Would it be a business model in India to introduce a horn for pedestrians?

Now there's the loud ringing of a brilliant bell – a vehement clang against the superior force of

honks. It emerges from a small pavilion, crowned by a pink turban, which stands in front of the gate in the middle of the square, surrounded on all sides by dense traffic. Between a ticket kiosk and a drinks stall, a Hanuman temple, barely two square metres in size, has been crammed with various little statues and pictures of gods. The priest, standing on the street-edge in front of his shrine in his scarlet coat, is now circling a butterlamp through his divine territory, singing hoarsely and chanting a prayer. Half-a-dozen men are gathered in front of the little temple. Even a gray-haired tourist-couple stands by for the benediction – and the man tries to photograph the shrine with his long zoom lens







poised between the worshippers. When the priest suddenly squirts water on the street, the couple rush away laughing – like as if they had just been showered with confetti at the Cologne Carnival.

Everything in this marketplace seems agitated, it is bursting with a restless lust for life. The scene seems self-sustaining in a strange way, kept aloft by a unique vigour with a sprinkling of perfumes of gasoline and smoke, masala tea and frying oil, detergent and soap.

A range of things irritate me here. At the moment, it is the all-pervading enthusiasm that preoccupies me – simply because I seldom experience it myself. Hardly ever when I read a text or look at a picture. A little more often when I discover a special dish. Most often, when I hear music, loud, with headphones, solely for my ears. Confronted with the fire which whips up everything, I feel cool, distant – and I suddenly have the suspicion that I may not be capable of art or of the art of living. Because enthusiasm is that substance, according to Robert Musil at any rate, without which no art can exist. What would life be without art? Am I just a dry piece of bread that longs for a little butter?

Now my gaze moves beyond the hurly-burly of the bazaar to focus on individual figures. I see

an old woman sitting on the floor offering knives, pincers, padlocks and cauliflowers laid out on a cloth. She sends out desert curses after customers who, despite her energetic negotiations, refuse to be her customers. I take in the sight of a tea merchant who has set up shop in the archway: «Tea keeps you fit and fine,» is written on a sign. But going by the look on his face while he sits amidst his red-and-gold packets, his life is dull. Even the face of the auctioneer of colourful plastic slippers, whose voice seems so vibrant, seems to signify that all this is neither about the desire to do business nor about something with a future, but simply about surviving the day. And is there any reason for the wrinkled green-grocer to tell me with every wrinkle about what a lousy customer I am?

Even though the scene appears to be imbued with a spirit of derring-do, with the get-up-and-go attitude of workaday life, most of the vendors, who look as if they are contributing their bit to the enthusiasm of the whole, seem to be trapped in a mundane routine.

It occurs to me that when I am travelling I often experience moments in which I am suddenly overcome by a sort of enthusiasm that is neither



triggered by an identifiable fact, nor aimed at a goal or specific prospect. I cannot describe the feeling of these moments, but they are precious to me. For Musil, such «bone-free enthusiasm and ashes that burn to nothing» was proof of «how much steam one makes». But what would an In-

dian bazaar be without such steam? And what would I be?

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

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