



## THE ELEFANTA-MAN

Tuesday, 28. March, 2017 – Bastar (India) Marketplace

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The market takes place on another day. The state tourism authority in the state capital Raipur, the Internet, the Lonely Planet, the travel agency in the provincial capital Jagdalpur, the hotel porter and the bus driver – were all wrong. The Bastar Haat does not go on stage on a Tuesday, but on another day of the week. The only fellow who has sprung up here today is me: out of my bush of false information, you might say. So I will not see, in the here and now, tattooed tribal folk, adivasis, or «first humans», as India's indigenous people call themselves. I will not be able to buy bell bowls, terracotta figures, gold conical nose plugs, braided cups, or fluorescent saris. I will taste neither the mahua flower nor the liquor that the aborigines burn from it – something they consume, according to twittering townspeo-

ple, right from infancy, women and men both. I will not be able to admire tipsy girls and watch boys tying knives to the claws of their roosters and hurling them into the deadly battle for honour, fame, and a few rupees.

The ten covered podiums on which the goods are displayed on market day are utterly empty. Only a few cows plod through the corridors between them, chomping on anything that looks remotely edible. At Number 7 a bitch, with suckled teats, lies dozing. Her muzzle jerks in her sleep and, every now and again, her legs move as though she is flying in slow motion across a meadow – or over a sausage. Suddenly it seems peculiar to me that even dogs dream. Do they also have an unconscious that manifests in these scenes? A warm wind sends red onion skins scat-



tering over the sandy ground and tears the last leaves off a Bodhi tree. It's time for the monsoon to make its advent and quench the thirst of the earth. From a nearby Gayatri shrine wafts in the chant of a priest, enhanced at moments by the lusty bell-like tone of a young woman. In a pomegranate bush flutters a bird, the clucking of which sounds like a permanent hiccup. The place smells of wood fire and vaguely of cowdung, of dried blood (only, from where does it emanate?) and of concrete in the sun.

A tourist's success depends primarily on whether he is in the right place at the right time: for Thanksgiving in Weizenhausen, at the Cape of the Quiet Sigh during sunset. Timing is of such critical importance that one can even conclude that the places are non-existent beyond these moments. I've been tending to catch the wrong moment lately: like today in Bastar. That actually makes me feel senseless and consequently near-invisible – unseen, in any case. At the same time I imagine that, apart from the right moments, there is a whole other universe for the tourist to discover, a whole parallel realm of false moments. At the moment, I can make believe I am the solitary king of this empire – there is no competitor in sight.

As I sit in the 18th place, wondering what to do next, the pedestal, pillars and roof before my eyes begin to transform into a kind of double-frame that encompasses the life beyond it. Through the space of the squares 2, 3, 14 and 15 I look through an open-on-two-sides box into the world behind it. And, with every passing minute, that reality moves closer into the box, both for my eye and for my feelings. People, animals and vehicles suddenly appear in this box before me – and then vanish. It seems somewhat like television. But my pictures do not come from a distance; rather, I'd speak here of my apparatus of near vision, which takes only a section of my environment into focus.

Much of what defines India's street scene is portrayed before my eyes: Women in shiny saris, bony old women in tattered clothes, office stallions with sagging paunches in steely shirts, young beauties in jeans and kurta, teenagers with over-developed biceps and skinny legs, trucks, buses, bullock carts, tractors, bicycles and mobile stalls. On one motorcycle are perched four best friends, on the next a small family with three children and a dog, the third is ferrying a whole bedstead, and on the luggage carrier of the fourth, hanging head-first



and arranged like a parade, are two dozen white chickens, alive, technically, at any rate.

«Over time, I realised I'd travel best if I did not move faster than a dog trudges.» This is what Gardner McKay writes in *Journey without a Map*. But the one who is trudging, is he not already traveling too fast? Isn't standing still the essence of traveling? He certainly makes the use of near vision possible. And he conveys, faster definitely than any other dynamic, a sense of the great realm of wrong moments.

Stopping is however the antithesis of travel, and so I vacate Seat No. 18 at some point and stroll back to the bus stop. On the way, I watch the fierce fight between a crow and a chicken for a slice of watermelon. Some things you see only rarely.

In front of the chai stall, which is also a bus stand, a woman with thick, horn-rimmed glasses speaks to me in the best of English and wants to know what I'm looking for in her village. I seize the chance to complain that I've traveled to Bastar for no reason, as there's a lot of misinformation circulating around here. Instead of compassion or understanding, I'm met with loud laughter. When she was a child, there was an adivasi who had almost always turned up in the market on the wrong

day. If she remembered correctly, he had belonged to the Dhuruva tribe and led the life of a loner. Alone, the man had sat under a tree, with small leaf-cups in front of him with chapura, ants chutney, in them. Since his chutney was top class, people were happy to buy it even on the wrong day: «When everything was gone, the man in the village shop bought a large bottle of Fanta and disappeared back into the bush. That's why we kids liked to call him the Elefanta-Man. In the last few years, however, I have never seen him.»

The bus comes and we get in. We're rolling when I have a change of heart and jump out back onto the road. A sharp knee pain reminds me of the collision with a motorcycle I'd had in Raipur three days earlier. But I recover quickly. The bus trundles off with a hiss. I walk to the nearest store, buy a 2-litre bottle of Fanta and run back to the market. In the last row of podiums, between No. 79 and No. 80, there is a place that does not carry a number because a thick Bodhi tree stands in front of it. At this spot I open the bottle, stand in front of it for perhaps three minutes, then bow slightly, and walk back to the main street.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.





