



DAY OF THE DRAGON

Tuesday, August 15, 2017 – Delhi (India) Red Fort, Netaji Subhash Marg

28.655843,77.236541

Odd how vividly I remember the smell wafting into my nose when it happened: of roasty-smoky grilling lamb sweating directly above glowing coals – an aroma that does not go with the carved-pineapple cart I pass by in order to get from the east gate of Red Fort to Chandni Chowk. I remember the aroma triggering heavy pangs of hunger in me – and, immediately after that, I feel the sidewalk shooting at me, making the world flip over, and turning the horizontal strip of the road into a vertical one.

Somehow, I protect my face as well as the camera in my hand from the impact. My upper body lands quite softly on my right shoulder; only my knees knock painfully into hard stone. The next moment, I feel something wet running over my legs. «Blood,» the thought flashes

through my head, and I try rapidly to get half-way up. I look down at myself to find there's no blood; my knees have simply landed in a sauce of sewage and oil glimmering between the street and the pavement.

I'm perched now on the rim of a traffic signal, rubbing my shoulder that has taken the punch of most of my body weight. Floating around my feet in the dark slush from which I have just pulled out my knees, are a few strands of colourful wrapping paper, an aluminum plate, a cardboard coffee mug, and a puri, one of those hollow tiny balls of fried dough (served with a filling of cold mint chutney and tamarind sauce) – which forms a vital part of arguably the most popular street snack in India: Pani-puri. There's also a torn newspaper page with an advertisement of the company, Air-



plane, inviting its customers to commemorate the next Eid Mubarak with their Basmati rice. Their wish for a «blessed festival» here probably refers to breaking of the fast on the last day of Ramadan, on the feast of Eid al-Fitr. Ramadan, however, ended in June.

I have to smile at the thought that the bit of road where my knees have accidentally landed is representative of the land: You could paint it and hang it on the wall as an Indian still life. Also, the fact that I went tumbling down right on Independence Day and just in front of the Red Fort seems to me like a lash inflicted by the God of Stumblers – after all, hadn't I adamantly refused

to buy any of the orange-white-and-green striped flags and hats, skull caps, badges, t-shirts and scarves that they had wanted to sell to me in the streets. And hasn't it also been barely three hours since Prime Minister Modi unrolled the Indian flag a few metres from this spot, above the Lahore Gate, whose link with the Indian tricolour proudly flown atop it in 1947 is considered a key moment in the country's struggle for independence? It is a grand occasion: the 70th anniversary of the country's Independence Day.

I realise just how mean a trick the God of Stumblers has played on me when I notice the thread of a paper kite lying on the ground. When I first fell, I'd realised only that my feet had stopped even as my upper body had moved one step forward. But I now see the ball of thread lying there and being tossed around by all manner of forces – by the wind as well as by toes or wheels coming into contact with its widely scattered ends or the loops of its strings. Right through the day, I've watched people getting entangled in kite strings, and admired the dancing movements with which they've freed themselves from the obstacles. I've been even more enthralled by the gestures and expressions of the kite-fliers who act curiously the-





atrical when you do not see the threads in their hands – and when you cannot tell which of the numerous kites soaring in the sky are the ones they are struggling to control by jerking the threads in their hands in a particular way. Who directs here and what is being directed is, at times, confusing to the foreigner’s eye. And the doughty kite-fliers suddenly seem like puppets whose movements are manipulated by invisible puppeteers. Sometimes, it appears as if the kite-fliers are engaged in a pantomimical dialogue with a celestial being, perhaps also with one of the great Indian buzzards that dominate the airspace over Indian cities. Some try to impose their will on the paper bird with elegance and tactile agility, others with ferocious power, yet others seem to work in a kind of trance. Like so much else that happens in public spaces, kite flying is also a man thing, a male hobby, albeit without age restrictions. Many little boys also fly kites from rooftops or balconies, some young men directly from the street; and adult men are to be seen operating the paper dragons with utmost enthusiasm, and no alley appears to be too narrow for the sport. No wonder then that the trees and omnipresent electrical installations fill up more and more as the day progresses with torn kites,

which lie trembling and twitching on branches, cables and transformers.

Kite flying on Independence Day has a history. In 1927, patriotic Indians protested with the slogan, «Go Back Simon», against the power of the Simon Commission, which was to draft a constitutional reform for this colony of British India. They also wrote this slogan on paper kites and made them ascend into the skies over Delhi. Since then, kite flying has been one of the traditions used by the people of Delhi to mark Independence Day and celebrate their country’s liberation from British rule.

Seen in this perspective, there appears to be a certain symbolic correctness, justice, that I, a Eu-









ropean visitor on Independence Day, mime the fallen kite that has got entangled in the dialectics of local conditions. I notice at this point that I'm sitting on the ground almost in front of the sacred Digambara Jain Temple. This temple runs a bird hospital, where upto 10,000 creatures can be treated — in keeping with the Jain principle of concern for everything that lives. Perhaps I can be admitted to the hospital as a fallen bird. But then it occurs to me that Jains take only vegetarian birds under their wing.

This confronts me with one of the questions that constantly accompanies me on my travels through India. As a tourist in this country, am I simply a harmless parakeet, picking a few grains here and there and adding a bit of beauty to the landscape with its colourful plumage? Or am I a dangerous bird of prey, flying with the kites through the sky and pouncing hungrily at everything alive that it discovers under the ground? If my hunch is correct — if I follow my nose, which right now is being weathered in the world of street food again — I am quite unlikely to be looked after in the Bird Hospital of the Jains.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.



