



THE INVENTION OF HONEY

Saturday, January 13, 2018 – Aizawl (India) MG Road

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The great thing about a tourist is that his gaze unveils the extraordinariness couched in the flat everyday life of a place. Occasionally, this gaze discovers or conjures up things that will afterwards sweeten the lives of «the locals», as they are more prettily and pithily called in English. A good tourist, if one is permitted to be idealistic, should consciously cultivate, refine, nurture, if need be protect and, above all, communicate. So that his presence takes on a meaning that goes beyond the economic aspect. The tourist definitely has a more realistic perspective on many facts – because life is extraordinary even when it seems to be the blooming same every day.

Tourists often marvel at many things that locals hardly bother with. In Aizawl this could, for instance, be the women trotting with small steps

briskly through the streets, bearing heavily laden baskets on their backs, held up by ribbons tied over the top of their heads. Or it could be the weird innards that butchers present with obvious pride to customers like me, as if they were lucky charms displayed in an alluring array, without being able to identify the organ. It could also be the young couples strolling hand-in-hand through the streets of Aizawl – something that would be unthinkable in other parts of India. And, oh yes, for the pedestrian unused to the torment imposed on him by the mindless drivers on India's roads, the very fact that nobody here blows the horn mindlessly is unbelievable. Then there are the mounds of luminous oranges, the lovely sarongs of some of the women, the jewel-like gloss of their hair, the contented eyes of babies being carried around in towels and, not



least, the pranks of the legendary Chhura. This little list is but a start; it can be significantly refined, lengthened.

The formal relationship between tourists and residents changes when something appears that is obviously unusual also for locals, such as a seller of wild honey. He has positioned himself on the fringe of MG Road, which meanders along the crests of the hills across which Aizawl spreads. Across the street from him is the stadium that belongs to the barracks of the Assam Rifles, a modern castle over the houses of the elite. He's a small fellow, squatting, he's no taller than the metal cauldron by his side, laden with a mixture of honey and dead bees. The honeycombs lying on a bed of leaves in front of him appear to be notably more powerful – a metre-long plank of wax. One wonders how he has managed to ferry the huge cauldron to the place, because there is not even a handcart near him. He must undoubtedly have accomplices.

The honeycombs are not for sale, he is quick to clarify, they are merely the poster model for the honey that he has bottled in disused drinks bottles and distributes at 300 rupees a bottle, a grand price. Rather absurd that he has brought all these

huge honeycombs along just in order to sell some honey. But, come to think of it, he is doing nothing other than what big departmental stores in Europe do – which is to make gigantic productions simply in order to draw attention to the occasional vanishing little item which they want to push. And the trick works: people stop to stand and stare, to wonder, dipping their fingers in the honey pot and tasting the sweet goo, questioning the seller, negotiating and ultimately carrying away, with a beam of satisfaction, a bottle of the sticky stuff.

I, too, buy a sip of honey. Whether the little man really comes from the forest, as he claims, I cannot ascertain. Wild honey could well look like this: a floating mush dotted with all manner of dark foreign bodies, parts of bees, bits of honeycomb, particles of wood. The honey tastes incredibly fresh but has, at the same time, an almost artificial fruit aroma, like that of the bon bon children love. While I taste it, I wonder what it means when I experience something as a tourist that is equally special for the locals. The special is actually the arch-enemy of the typical, which one has to enoble or honour as a tourist. When I encounter the atypical, do I move away from my tourist's perspective? Do I swing in sync with the locals for a





moment? Does the honey-pot show that the differences between the visitor and the inhabitant, which sometimes seem larger than life, essentially hardly exist – or, at the least, are just functional, provided both sides limit themselves to their roles. The shift of views brought about by the insect-trap on the roadside suddenly raises questions over questions – quite in the manner of bees swarming out in search of nectar on a sweet summer day.

I now remember a story that Ovid tells in his *Fasti*. Bacchus travels with his followers through a strange mountain, the Maenads sing, the satyrs

happily beat their chintels. The metallic sound of their instruments attracts bees, which Ovid describes as «birds with wings made out of air» (a description that exists perhaps only in my translation). Bacchus captures the creatures and locks them in a hollow tree-stump and, soon after, he has invented honey – which has since stuck firmly to Greece’s culinary reputation. Is there any further proof required to show that tourists are indeed something great?

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.