



WITHDRAWING FROM THE WORLD

Saturday, January 13, 2018 – Aizawl (India) Tobacco Market

23.734564, 92.718703

I've quite forgotten how tobacco smells, about what an intriguing, heady perfume it is. But the memory's wafting back. I'm looking at some 20 little stands located in an outhouse in Bara Bazar: there are heaps of tobacco lying around everywhere, with little piles of yellowish cigarette-paper nestling into them. Every now and then a swathe of smoke drifts through the room, emitting the smell of glowing cardboard and fast-burning pieces of wood. It's cool inside this cellar because it lies under the stairs leading to the upper floor of the house, and the dealers have kindled a cosy fire over which they can warm their hands from time to time.

The tobacco sellers, who are almost without exception women, actively advertise their wares by puffing on cigarette after cigarette. The old lady, whose stand is in front of the shaft that lets some

daylight into the cellar, has nothing to do at the moment except to slowly puff one cloud after the other into the air. Lost in thought, she sits there staring into space. The smoke clearly provides her with everything she needs at that moment. Even quieter is the man who lies dozing behind her on some tobacco bags. The mood and the light remind me of tavern paintings, like those often painted by David Teniers or Adriaen Brouwer. In their scenes, too, there is a fair deal of smoking and invariably somebody snoozing – and often, through a door in the background, a strong shimmer that penetrates the room, hinting at the existence of a brighter world outside.

While savouring the scene here in Mizoram, where almost seventy per cent of the population depend on the cigarette, I suddenly remember



what had once so fascinated me about smoking — which had been part of everyday life on the streets of Europe, too, back then: The beauty of the act of smoking, of course, but also of that moment of withdrawing from the world, when you make the tobacco glow and release a big cloud into the air from your mouth, creating your own space wherever you are. These clouds of smoke have always seemed to me like speech bubbles, with a thousand

squiggles and stripes, curves, loops, cavities and halos — utterly abstract and purely ornamental statements. In bringing a ban on smoking in Europe our concern was also that people should be more restricted to the concrete, the real, the tangible. We have gained in health, as a consequence, but probably lost in poesy.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.