

Nomad Letter 10

Part 3 - Looking to the Past and the Future in Delhi, India

Our explorations around Agra have increased our comfort level while adding greatly to our understanding of traveling in India. They also fulfilled a life long dream - to see and experience the Taj Mahal in person.

We had become quite comfortable living in the Tourist Rest House and it would have been easy to stay longer, but we feel compelled to travel on to our next stop - Delhi. So, we pack up and take a taxi to the rail station where we buy tickets and wait for the train to Delhi. We board the train and again go through the process of upgrading to second class sleeper. This time we are riding with three young men who have traveled from Goa. Their English is good so we learn that they have traveled overnight. Before long the train pulls out and a soldier arrives to check documents. He proceeds to thoroughly search the three young men. Satisfied, he moves on. We never learn what he expected to find!

The train speeds past wheat fields and small villages and into the outskirts of Delhi to the Hazrat Nizamuddin Rail Station. Men gather around us offering assistance, so we state our needs: a telephone and a taxi. Of course, they can provide both, they assure us. As promised, they guide us to a PCO, a Public Communications Office, where we call our friend, Greg Polk. He explains that he is in a meeting but that we should take a taxi to his home and Monica, their housekeeper and cook, will be there to welcome us and show us to our room.

Before proceeding, we should tell you about Greg Polk. Greg and his wife, Rebecca, live in Delhi where Rebecca works for USAID. Friends from Albuquerque introduced us to Greg and Rebecca via E-mail and they invited us to stay with them while we visit Delhi. Astounded by this generous invitation we hesitated, but Greg assured us that we would be welcome, so we agreed.

So, we take a taxi to Anand Niketan, Greg and Rebecca's neighborhood, find their home and are welcomed by Monica. We relax until Greg comes home and we begin our friendship, talking over a delicious meal and continuing into the evening.

For the next week, we spend our days exploring Delhi, both the Past and the Future. The Past is embodied in the monuments of the long and glorious history of this place. The Future is the measures that are being taken "to make Delhi a global metropolis and a world class city, where all the people are engaged in productive work with a decent standard of living and quality of life in a sustainable environment."

As we experience the Past, we learn that the earliest settlements in the area date back to perhaps 1000 BC, but the historic structures that remain to be visited date from 1200 AD when the Afghan kings conquered the feudal rulers of India, followed by the Mughals who arrived in 1526. We see the inspiration for the Taj Mahal in the graceful red and white sandstone tomb of Emperor Humayan (right) and explore Delhi's Red Fort (next page), a vast, red sandstone walled complex built by Shah Jahan. Its buildings display graceful, intricately carved sandstone entries, delicate marble screens and lovely inlaid floral marble wall panels. Walking through the gardens and lawns past these graceful buildings, we try to imagine the life of the emperor, surrounded by his advisors and his wives, managing the affairs of state.



In more modern times, Delhi became the focus of government activity in 1911 when the British shifted their capital from Kolkata to Delhi. Renowned town planners Edward Lutyens and Herbert Baker planned the city of New Delhi in the year 1912, an effort which gave the city its classic government buildings and wide boulevards (pictures of Rajpath and India Gate below).

We learned that India's Independence in 1947 was followed by a migration that increased Delhi's population from 700,000 to 1,700,000 by 1951. This tremendous influx of people resulted in migrant settlements in open spaces and caused a virtual collapse of civic services as the existing local bodies at that time, were not adequately equipped to cope with a changing scenario of this



scale. In response, the Indian Government created the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in 1955 with the primary objective of ensuring the development of Delhi in accordance with a plan. The importance of DDA's efforts has become crystal clear as Delhi's population has grown to 13,780,000 in 2001 and is currently (2006) estimated to be 16,200,000.

This history of planning for the future has enabled the National Capital of Delhi to survive this tremendous population growth with more grace and dexterity than one might anticipate. Yet, the challenges of providing shelter, mobility, livelihood, infrastructure and governance for this massive and ever-expanding conglomeration of people have overwhelmed and overtaken the careful planning processes.

We are invited to come to the DDA Offices, to learn about the planning processes that have been put into place to move Delhi toward its future vision. The DDA planners tell us that in 1980, they began to develop plans to provide housing for the expected increases in population. A part of this planning involves the development of three sub-cities, Narela, Rohini and Dwarka. These three sub-cities are "Master Planned Communities", located in areas along the west side of the "Mother City". Each Master Plan incorporates provision for housing, transportation, water, waste water and solid waste services, areas of open space and sports complexes, space for educational institutions, and retail and commercial devel-

opment. Emphasis is on pedestrian friendliness, transit alternatives to car trips, and locating many services within walking or biking distance.

Our Urban Ecologist instincts perk up at this, and we ask our hosts if we may visit one of these new cities, Dwarka. They agree and so, the next day, Mr. C. P. Sharma arrives at Greg's home. Greg generously offers us the use of his car, and driver, Philip so we all head off to Dwarka. While touring Dwarka, we experience the feeling of 'other worldliness', beyond the hustle-bustle and press of people one experiences in many areas of Delhi. By the combination of conscious urban design, planning and oversight of construction, the DDA has been able to create a sub-city that provides for the daily needs of residents effectively and conveniently. At the same time the development intensity is very high, more than 30 dwelling units per acre in the residential sectors, higher than most Americans have experienced. The high rise residential buildings reminded us a bit of the housing projects on the south side of Chicago that have since been razed. We wonder what the residents think about their lifestyle here?



By contrast, we later walk through the neighborhoods around Anand Niketan in southwest Delhi. Within a radius of 2 miles, there are blocks of expensive apartments behind gates with security guards, DDA flats for mid and low income families, a lively fresh fruit and vegetable market street, courtyards and streets with retail shops and small factories at street level and flats or offices above, and shaded green parks. There is even the local trash recycling center where residents who live on site, sort the trash and live on the income from selling the recyclables, as well as an informal community of squatters in an enclave off the main street. This area was not built under the guidance of a plan but rather it evolved organically to meet the needs for shelter and livelihood of an extraordinarily diverse population. We find a certain charm here that is not yet present in Dwarka, but will hopefully come as more people move in.



Looking to the future, Delhi will continue to face significant challenges as the population grows. Having set its sights on being "a global metropolis and a world class city", it is imperative for the City to provide shelter and livelihood for all its residents. This means accomplishing the construction of sufficient housing to catch up on the backlog and then keep up with the increased demand. Can this be accomplished without losing the charming organic diversity of neighborhoods such as Anand Niketan? Will the con-

scious urban design of Dwarka and the other sub-cities provide livable communities for people? Will the Metro provide sufficient high capacity transit to encourage Delhiites not to buy cars?

We believe that there is a high probability that Delhi will be able to achieve the future it envisions, but not without some incredibly hard work! Part of that work should be to build a strong collaboration with all of the stakeholders, from the residents of the sub-cities, the informal communities, the charming neighborhoods and all the other residents of Delhi, to the development community to the other agencies such as the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation and Delhi Transport Corporation, responsible for transport and the Delhi Jal Board, responsible for water supply, and others.

Another part of that work will be to honestly consider the answer to the question, "How large can a mega-city be?" This is the real ultimate question that Delhi, Mumbai, Shanghai, Mexico City and all of the mega-cities of the world must answer in the next 50 years. We believe Delhi is up to the challenge.

Having spent a week exploring the old and new Delhi, it is clear to us that there is so much to learn here that a week is a vastly inadequate period of time to comprehend the complexity of old and new, past and future, surreal and "in your face" that is Delhi.

But we must move on. With overwhelming gratitude to Greg for his hospitality, we take a taxi to the Indira Gandhi International Airport and fly east over India's heartland to Varanasi, the holy city on India's most holy river, the Ganga (Ganges). We'll share our experiences in this remarkable city in our next letter.

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