

POINT OF VIEW

Destination India: the soul of a people

Lately, I've been speaking very little about India. Not because I don't have the opportunity to do so, since I work with India and have several Indian friends whom I see and speak with regularly. The main reason for my silence is that prejudices about India are starting to become a little too much for me.

Sonia Bernicchi

Often but reluctantly, I find myself drawn into discussions about India by people who have never been there but would-so-love-to go-there, and by others who know very little about this country but are ready to give a preconceived, clear image of it: it is an extremely poor country, it's dirty, when-you've-seen-one-temple-you've-seen-'em-all, nothing works as it should, the all-around chaos is tiresome and frustrating, the food is too spicy. And they always ask me the same question: "How can you like India?" Quite simply, I like it and I feel at home there, even if in a slightly different way. India became a part of my life several years ago, unexpectedly, but I loved it right from the start and there is no exact reason why nor an explanation.

THERE ARE SEVERAL INDIAS: from the big-city India to the village India; the few, important families that hold the economic power of this immense country and the multitude for whom it seems that the earth is not big enough to feed them and makes every possible effort to remain afloat. There is the Bollywood India and the India of the Sadhu - the Holy Beggars -, the futuristic India of IT science and the other one, the one of street children. The India of economic development serenely coexists with the India of spirituality.

It is a country that succeeds in making everything and everyone coexist and goes forward all the while firmly anchored to its past¹.

My Indian friends told me that during the Commonwealth Games that took place in New Delhi in October 2010, the problem of cobras that were found in some athletes' rooms was resolved using the ancient art of the snake charmers, and the one of monkeys roaming about in search of food was put in check by introducing bigger monkeys who kept the little ones under control.

This is the marvel of India. We are used to living in protected worlds; India is the opposite.

I can understand that it may scare us because we are thrown into a reality that has no margins for protection and where all human sensations are amplified, and this many times arouses a deep sense of dismay. But if we go beyond the initial impact of misery, disease, dirt, chaos, we can detect a wonderful harmony and a light in the eyes of the people that we have lost a long time ago.

I LIKE EVERY SOUTH OF THE WORLD BECAUSE IT IS IMPERFECT BUT HUMAN AND RICH IN ENERGY. When I go to India, I have no expectations and I never know what I'll find. I limit myself to living the experience and roaming around based on the rhythms of where I happen to find myself. I have sometimes spoken with persons who have a platonic idea of India and think that it is still today a British colony where people spend time playing polo and drinking tea. Others see it as an escape destination from the complexity of daily routines and find refuge in the ashram to meditate, spending their time in contact with other westerners and are not very immersed in the world surrounding them. What strikes me is that it seems like they already know everything and that they have a distorted familiarity with India. They look for confirmation to their expectations that have nothing to do with the authenticity of the country. For this reason, upon their return, their tales are full of clichés because they have not seen through the humility of their own eyes. There is always the need to catalogue one's experiences and people prefer to hurriedly confirm what they already thought before embarking on the trip because this is reassuring.

I like Tamil Nadu and Orissa that, proud of their traditions, try not to let themselves be overwhelmed by globalization, and it is well known that I like Calcutta because it is more India than Delhi. In Europe, this city is associated with images of poverty but Calcutta, with its three large universities and a revolutionary history behind it, is famous

for being India's intellectual center, and College Street, with its innumerable bookstores and publishing houses, is a prime example of the city's cultural vivacity. The street is full of "shops" which are wooden kiosks with a sign and the people here are immersed in the world of books. Everywhere people are reading, even in backshops. There are people buying, people selling and people wandering through the kiosks in search of rarities. Instead, in Mahabalipuram there are no actual bookshops. To go to the beach, I pass through a street with a store selling precious stones where I see the clerk, a young and shy kashmiro, always immersed in reading. One day I enter his shop. He's reading a book that I have read and loved very much, and here an entire world opens up: books read, books to be read, suggestions and new ideas. I remember thinking that, if I lived in Mahabalipuram, I would have a friend I could speak about books with, just like back home.

PURI, THE HOLY CITY, EXPRESSES ITSELF THROUGH THE MULTIPLICITY OF ITS TEMPLES, THE MOST ASTOUNDING OF WHICH IS THE LORD JAGANNATH (LORD OF THE UNIVERSE) dedicated to Krishna but forbidden to non-Hindus. And I've been taught that you can't become Hindu. You are born Hindu and I immediately come to terms with that reasoning. Along the sacred road leading to the temple, I can admire it from atop the terrace of a coffee shop. It is told that a person can obtain "moksha" (total dissolution of the ego) by spending three days and three nights here. The Jagannath temple is part of the Dham Char that every Hindu must make at least once in a lifetime. Here, there is everything that embodies the essence of India that cannot be explained but that can be felt. And in Puri, too, as often happens in Indian cities, the West is clearly separated from the East.

I arrived late in the evening and in the dark it is not easy to move about in India since there are very few lights. Before choosing my accommodation, I wandered around a bit in my car. The hotels are situated at the beginning of the city, on CT Road and on the beachfront, Marine Drive Road. Instinct tells me to stop here where the life is 100% Indian: beachfront packed with people, stalls, traffic, cows, bicycles. The beach is big and very beautiful and there is a continual coming and going of humanity. The sea is open, impetuous. I inquire at a hotel on the seafont but to my request for a room, the proprietor hurriedly answers me that there are no vacancies. After a moment of silence, I say that I would like to remain in Puri for a rather long period and, at that point, things change. I am offered a wonderful suite with a view of the sea at Indian prices, and here the adventure begins. In the course of the days that follow, I make friends with the families that I meet at breakfast and dinner and I realize that there are no westerners in this hotel. There's no marmalade or Pepsi or Coca Cola. The only sparkling soft drink you can find that resembles Coke is called THUMBS and it is Indian.

A few days later, given the difficulty of finding English newspapers, the hotel owner gives me his and we start making small talk. The following days, I always found an English newspaper at the reception and after dinner, the proprietor invites me to have chai and we made pleasant conversation. One night I asked him why, at my initial request to stay at his hotel, I was answered that I couldn't, and he very candidly answered me: "Because westerners are not interested in staying in this part of the city. They prefer to remain on the other side and it seems they are not interested in the sacredness of this place. I think you can surely understand that your wanting to spend a long period in Puri surprised me".

Rolf Potts states that vagabonding is an art and that maybe, if we traveled not in the robes of greedy consumers with ideas that are already the projection of what we would like but which is not, our travel experience would certainly be more serene and authentic. We must observe and not judge, see things for what they are and live the moment.

India surprises me every time. For me, it is an unexpected gift, a chance that makes me live a bright experience of life. And each time, I find my India. Next destination, Gujarat, the land of Gandhi.

ITALIAN-INDIAN BUSINESS. India has a lot in common with Italy. Suketu Mehta says that from Bombay you can see Naples and that the two cities are much more similar than they are different: they are both located in a splendid bay, they live in a state of permanent administrative chaos and they both survive thanks to very strong social and family networks that were born in autonomous fashion with respect to State2.

And like one of the characters of Shantaram says "Indians are the Italians of Asia. It can also be said Italians are the Indians of Europe".

Indians-Italians: in common we have the respect for traditions, the importance of family, food as a moment of joy and meeting with others, religion, passion for music. Through contingent culture and situations, we have developed a great virtue like patience. We always find a solution to large and small problems, if not through reason, through creativity and ingenuity, making the impossible possible.

But there is also the other side of the coin. In India many people speak English, they are similar to us also in their physical features and we think we know them already.

Instead, they have something elusive. There is always a chiaroscuro, a certain je-ne-sais-quoi that is undecipherable and inscrutable in their ways. It looks like a symbiosis of opposites2 in a culture that embodies many opposi-

tes. For this reason, it is not easy to work in India and if we are considering going there on business and concluding it quickly, we could be in for an unpleasant surprise.

INDIA IMPOSES ITSELF WITH ITS TIMES AND RHYTHMS AND IT IS THE COUNTERPART WHO MUST ADAPT. BEFORE DOING BUSINESS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO CREATE HUMAN RELATIONS. There is always time for a cup of tea and it is polite to accept. Business proposals must be detailed and well presented. Wanting to close negotiations on the first meeting is impossible and it is also counter-productive because this attitude is perceived as rigid.

In Indian companies, decision-making is often a long procedure due not only to their bureaucratic nature but also because the persons who count are present only in the final part of the negotiation. Clashes and aggression in presenting one's ideas are to be avoided at all costs because they are not part of Indian culture and are counter-productive behaviors. Indians will never say no. They'll tell you that they "will discuss it later" or that they "must speak with others about it". I am a passionate and instinctive person by nature, and I've had to surrender to this logic and wait, beyond all the doubts, problems and misunderstandings, for the time to be ripe and for them to trust me in order to conclude the negotiation.

I have been working with India for about fifteen years now - not consecutively for market reasons - but in the course of this time I have always maintained contact with my customers. There is always the occasion to make a phone call to talk about this and that, about politics, sports, the family, to exchange Christmas or Diwali³ greetings and then talk about business. I have been invited to the home of my customers who have then become friends, I've met their families, had dinner with them and seen how they live. You should always expect personal questions about your family, children, etc. Even if, in our eyes, this attitude may seem intrusive, it is instead a way to get to know you and a sign of friendship. In my business trips to Delhi, Calcutta, Nagpur, first I participated at welcome dinners, assisted at Ganesh celebrations and at the Diwali festival, but when the negotiations began, I had to acknowledge that my counterparty possessed a great level of professionalism and preparation. I still have a very vivid memory of my first meeting with an important Indian paper group - JK Corporation - to discuss the possibility of opening a joint-venture company in India to produce hygienic rolls. Since the very first meeting, many managers with decision-making powers were present at the negotiation table and among these Harshpati Singhania, member of the Singhania family, owner of JK Corporation, stood out. His presence made me think that there was a real interest by the Indian counterparty for the project. We are speaking about fifteen years ago but already at that time Indian IT instruments were in the vanguard and I assisted at a splendid presentation by the company that left me speechless. Then, it was my turn and I think the passion and enthusiasm with which I presented my company and the project aroused more enthusiasm in my audience than did my Power Point presentation which was less spectacular, to say the least! Meetings went on for days between the Delhi offices and the paper mill about 100 Km from Calcutta. At the time, things were not yet mature for such a project but for me it was an important experience that marked a fundamental phase in my professional growth.

ONE OTHER THING: INDIANS ARE "POLYCHRONIC" AND TEND TO TREAT SEVERAL TOPICS SIMULTANEOUSLY. You should be prepared for some distractions like for example a secretary entering the room to have some documents signed or the conversation straying from the main topic, although this does not mean lack of interest or attention.

Indians are inductive in their approach to the world. Knowing the social and historical fabric of people, events, ideas is a way to know them a bit better.

Our cultures define the principles on which the world turns and the way we interact, communicate with others, develop and maintain relationships. Doing business in worlds different from ours means focusing our attention on an understanding and a respect of the other person's culture and way of doing business on a multi-national level. Understanding the differences, not judging cultures based on our western parameters and adapting is the key to behavior. And if we do not forget that we are Mediterranean and succeed in opening ourselves with curiosity and interest to a new experience, wonderful bridges of communication can arise that were before inconceivable, and each will find his or her own personal and constructive way of doing business in India. •