

Chapter 1: First Impressions

It is almost impossible to describe India in words alone. The nation is so large and enjoys such a rich and diverse mixture of language, culture, climate and history that it would confound even the most dedicated author. It is in many ways the most paradoxical nation on earth for it offers glorious riches juxtaposed with the desperation of extreme poverty.

The Lonely Planet guide to Delhi does make an attempt to describe why it is worth persevering through your first experience of India: "Your first impression of Delhi is unlikely to be a good one, particularly if it's also your first impression of India. You'll most likely notice the pollution, the crowds, the smell, the noise and the ceaseless hassles long before you notice the city's charms. But it's worth persevering: the history of this city is fascinating, and it's all around you; the bazaars of Paharganj are a wonderful introduction to India's backpacker trail; the city's monuments are among the most architecturally striking in the country; and the food here is great."¹

In many respects India is a true world leader. Indian mathematicians gave the world the concept of the zero. Indian artists produce more films each year in Bollywood than Hollywood. India and China combined make up more than a third of all the people on the planet. The quality of the Indian knowledge based industry is leading the world into an outsourcing revolution that is no less important than the invention of the steamship or railway.

However any first-time visitor to India will be shocked by the images of poverty and deprivation. Landlords often avoid general maintenance and so buildings are untended and dirty. I have witnessed elevator users pray before their ascent as live wires hang loose from the floor buttons. Entire shanty towns are constructed from plastic sheeting and corrugated iron within sight of modern technology parks and gleaming offices.

The number of beggars on the street desperately seeking a few rupees is shameful. The beggars are often children or utilise children in a Dickensian ruse for increased profit. Foreign visitors will feel extreme discomfort as a young baby is pressed into the window of their stationary taxi or a small child tugs at a moving trouser leg.

Foreigners are a target for many of the beggars because they often retain the concept of monetary value they use back at home and are also less desensitised to the plight of the poor. A well meaning visitor handing over a small gift of \$2 to shake off a beggar would be surprised to learn that they had just handed over almost twice the mean daily income - \$460 per year according to the World Bank in 2001.

The grinding poverty is in part maintained by the low level of literacy in India. The total literacy rate returned in the 2001 census was 65.38 per cent.² This average figure across all states is skewed because the urban Indians are more literate than those from the rural villages, but the fact remains that across the entire population one third of the people cannot read or write. However, the population of India is so large that even with such a low level of average literacy, the nation still produces over two million college graduates every year.

This issue is being targeted by the government and a large contingency of NGOs who focus on specific literacy projects. As India leads the way into the outsourcing revolution through its expertise in offshore processes the question of general literacy is one of the most important domestic political priorities.

India and the world are poised on the cusp of a revolution. We have been here before though. The English of the late Eighteenth century witnessed immense social upheaval as the steam engine and cotton gin revolutionised textile production. This dawn of capitalism was subsequently enhanced through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the railways, steamships, steel production, widespread electricity, automobiles and then information technology.

Now the knowledge and information revolution is being led by India. The nation has a population in excess of one billion people with millions of educated English speakers entering the workforce each year. If California was the location for the 1990s dot com zeitgeist then India is the present location.

After a presentation at the Indian High Commission in London the British journalist Bryan Glick commented: "It was difficult not to be impressed by the way Information Technology has been identified as an area where India can have an enormous global influence as well as boosting its own economy. IT exports are currently \$10 billion and growing by 30 per cent a year."³

India is often portrayed in a more negative light. The world media is frightened of the knowledge based economy and how it allows skilled tasks to be performed remotely. In the British technology paper, *Computer Weekly*, Brian Thomson wrote an opinion piece titled 'Exporting the future' about the disasters that would befall any country that welcomes outsourcing. In his Orwellian vision of the UK: "BT's field operatives receive their daily job sheets via the internet, their PDAs talk to Chinese servers, their monthly pay is transferred directly into their Egg accounts. They drive their Daewoo vans to the supermarket on the way home, where the shelves are stacked to plans e-mailed from Delhi; the checkouts send sales information back."⁴

To any business leader with a responsibility to corporate stakeholders this sounds far from Orwellian - it sounds like progress. It sounds exciting. It sounds like now. Why wait the five years that Thomson predicts it will take to reach this point?

India is far from just a better value workforce. The larger working population often means it is possible to locate niche services that just would not be possible at home. Trevor Foster-Black, managing director of Coalition Development, a UK research company that provides information on banking employees to recruitment firms, uses researchers in India to structure and format data. He says: "It would be very difficult to find such high-calibre people to do similar work in London."