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LETTER FROM INDIA

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LETTER FROM INDIA

Literature professors Lars Larson and Molly Hiro are in Mysore, India, this year on a rare double Fulbright grant, with their children; notes from Lars on their life in the city that probably was the model for R.K. Narayan's superb 'Malgudi' novels.

Khadi is a hand-loomed cloth that Gandhi made symbolic of self-reliance; all Indian flags are supposed to be made only of it (despite the plastic ones sold everywhere).

Everything tastes better with mango or lime pickle (the Indian form of salsa).

Mexican food appears to be completely absent in India; no one we've met knows of its existence. Avocados can be found in stores but they are only used to make smoothies.

India is still a hand-lettered world — slick machines have not yet entirely replaced the art of hand-painted lettering. A plurality of street signs, home addresses, ads, etc. were all done with a can of paint and the human hand's gesture.

The most common bicycles ridden on the streets appear to be from the 1950s: they're beautiful work-horses of heavy metal, with metal doodads everywhere, and they bear muscular names like "Atlas" and "Hero."

Custom here makes it somewhat impertinent to address strangers by their names; it's far more polite to call strangers "brother" or "sister" (if they're around your age) or "auntie" or "uncle" (if older).

India has the world's second-largest newspaper market. But what does it mean if a major newspaper regularly sells the entirety of its front page (except for the masthead) to an advertiser? (Talking to you, *Times of India*).

Shockingly, there is no India Pale Ale in India. (It's lager.) In fact, alcohol of any sort is largely a social taboo, at least in non-metropolis India. At dinner parties, you'd never bring wine — you have to play it safe with a box of sweets.

Despite the soul-rending air-horn blasts of passing trucks, the vehicles themselves are a form of folk art. Each driver appears to have hand-painted and decorated his rig.

"Incense City" is one of Mysore's nicknames (due to its longstanding work with sandalwood and perfumes). Another nickname: "The Regal City" (for Mysore was the region's seat of power for hundreds of years, until Bangalore took that prize of late). Still another nickname: "Silk City" (with its historic sericulture industry, thanks to the circulation of the Silk Road).

While the ever-present lawn (turf-grass) is acre-by-acre the largest "crop" grown in America, it's non-existent in Mysore (save one golf course on the city's outskirts).



While North India drinks its daily chai, South India sensibly prefers coffee (though it's always diluted with chicory and heaps of milk and sugar).

Vehicles always have the right-of-way, the bigger the righter. There is zero automotive deference to pedestrians. With this rule of thumb in mind, India's road usage is perfectly predictable, rational, safe, and unambiguous.

Swastikas are everywhere: scratched into temples, painted on street-corners, incorporated onto buildings, included on official publications. Here, they do not signify one of humanity's most obscene episodes, but rather their original meaning from Sanskrit origins: good luck ("jai ho"). This is causing us tremendous cognitive dissonance.

Having grown melancholy over the minimal presence of libraries in Mysore, I'm convinced America's libraries are one of the nation's greatest assets. We miss them and the gifts they bring to our daily lives.

India is famous for fostering difference: 350 languages, 1,600 dialects, 650 different tribes. Despite waves of invaders through the eons (Aryans, Portuguese,

Mughals, Brits), India itself hasn't invaded another country. It absorbs difference without swallowing it whole.

Wandering cows can be found on nearly every block here — every day is Independence Day for bovines.

Best time of day in Mysore: 4 p.m., when schools release streams of India's youth giggling in their smart uniforms down every neighborhood street. Some wait for busses, some walk soberly, some do a synchronized dance from last weekend's Bollywood film. Others smile at the passing foreigner and try out their English and school-learning ("Excuse me, uncle: what country? Ah — U.S.: Barack Obama! Capital: Washington D.C.!").

Lovely: solo Mysore women steering their own dark scooters through the streets with silk scarves breezing behind in puffs of turquoise, saffron, or lapis.

Nearby: the friendly neighborhood crematorium (disposal-of-choice for Hindu corpses). Shops selling bangles (five rupees each), coconut vendors, the occasional candy-colored temple (Please Remove Shoes Before Enter), yoga parlors.

90% of India's marriages are still arranged by parents rather than the spouses themselves. (The latter of which are marginalized under the phrase "love marriages" — the very idea!). The Indian divorce rate compared with the US, where more than 50% split? But India still suffers under the misery of dowry and its great expectations.

In India, slowly rocking your head back and forth, back and forth means Yes!

Struck up a conversation with a vendor of ankle bracelets one Sunday at the city's open-air market. We bought nothing, but he took us for a tour of place, gave us directions to all the things we needed, coached us through several vegetable purchases with the help of his native language, and gave us an envelope with a thick, cream-colored invitation to his sister's wedding next month.

Reason to feel good today: India's nation of 1.2 billion has a free and argumentative press, thriving mass media, and a deep and exuberant creativity. What better situation could be wished for one-sixth of the human species?