

Ed. by Gioia Guerzoni

**INDIA. Five Stories, Six Reports, Three Comics**

*INDIA. Cinque storie, sei reportage, tre fumetti*

anthology - fiction

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Eleven short stories and three comics explain the life of the new Indian monster-cities, of the futuristic directional centers of Delhi and of the populous shanty towns of Mumbai. Places of thousands of years of History projected into a hyper-technological and hyper-consumeristic future far from the cloying exoticisms and Bollywood clichés. India brings together the voices of young writers, artists and directors committed to confronting themselves with the weight of tradition, the drifting of progress and capitalism, the endemic poverty, and the difficult coexistence among the religions. The best of a generation «returned home» after the classic period abroad in the West; those who have decided to stay and understand. Without becoming blinded by the obvious «Shining India» mirage.

**Eleven writers**

born in (or around) the seventies: Altaf Tyrewala, Mridula Koshy, Tishani Doshi, Sonia Faleiro, Chandradas Choudhury, Samrat Choudhury, Annie Zaidi, Palash Krishna Mehrotra, Anindya Roy, Smriti Nevatia and comics by Sarnath Banerjee.

# INDIA. Five Stories, Six Reports, Three Comics

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Isbn Edizioni

## PREFACE

In 1975, Giorgio Manganelli noted in his *Esperimento con l'India*\*: *“I see it growing, huge mass of flesh, with its precipices and smell of sandal, its inconsumable souls, its ubiquitous life and death, the place of transformations, the headquarters of the Absolute, the factory of ascetics, the assembly line of reincarnations, the store of symbols. An immense country where allegoric monkeys jump from branch to metaphoric branch and volunteer beggars, aware of thirty reincarnations, lay snares to save your soul; the warehouse of dreams, the only place where deities still exist, appointed by a God sunk in his own self and simultaneously incarnated everywhere, a place of temples and lepers. Here, Buddha or iva’s smiles have never been erased. They are still mellow and incomprehensible, ecstatic and mortal.”*

The nation that Manganelli – and in the same decade Rossellini, Pasolini, Moravia, Flaiano and also Ginsberg, Louis Malle and many others – explored, is still very similar to his description. But amazing mutations have occurred. Cities have turned into expanses of glass-sheathed skyscrapers, sumptuous shopping malls, giant IT parks housing callcenters that appease the most bizarre complaints and requests of millions of Western consumers.

Traffic whizzes past on flyovers only to slow down before carts and cows. Mobile ringtones add Bollywood hits to the lysergic cacophony of horns. Skies choke with low-cost flights. Internet cafés teem with kids engrossed in virtual cricket matches while grannies skyping with distant relatives wave at webcams.

And yet, besides the joys of a “splendid and progressive destiny”, urban slums have grown ten times bigger since the 70s due to unstoppable migratory flows from the poorest states and the countryside. Housing is almost unaffordable in major cities, where property rents and sale prices are often at par with London or New York. In rural areas the suicide rates of peasants strangled by debts keep increasing (according to a November 2007 issue of *Outlook Magazine*, 2500 farmer deaths have been reported in the past two years in the state of Maharashtra). Riots based on ethnic, religious, or caste divides, often fomented by political forces for their own short-term advantages, are as periodic as the cycles of the moon. Thousands of people are expelled from their ancestral lands, often without compensation or resettlement, in order to make way for new dams or IT-parks or the notorious SEZs, ‘special economic zones’, where

\* Unfortunately “*Experiment with India*” has not been translated into English. This is only my tentative version. For those who are familiar with French, it has been published by Gallimard, with the title *Itinéraire Indien*.

entrepreneurs enjoy unprecedented freedom from taxes and labour regulations. The Naxals keep fighting and proselytising, relations with Pakistan remain tense, Kashmir is always on red alert.

And then, to add to the bane of such appalling changes, a relatively recent phenomenon that is fast becoming widespread: mobocracy, the power of the mob, i.e. lynching as a new form of justice. Millions of young people frustrated by unemployment and by the mirage of a wealth which is only apparently within reach, the failure of an overburdened judicial system dragging cases for decades, the bureaucratic lethargy, the inertia of the police – if not criminal abuse of power – all this induced the common citizen to lose faith in the system, seeing self-made justice as the only solution.

Sure enough, even in the poorest villages there is now a television set and often a broadband connection, but 400 million people still live on a dollar a day, malnutrition rates are double compared to sub-Saharan Africa, and over 40% of the population remains illiterate.

In India they call it the “Great Theft”: within ten years the country came at the forefront as the youngest, fastest growing economic power in the world and is willing to continue its climb at any price. But the new Shining India glitters obscenely: hidden under the carpet of the sexiest globalisation is the filth of corruption, of “structural adjustments”, of the collusion between political/judicial power and emerging economic forces.

Perhaps, as Economy Nobel prize winner Amartya Sen wrote on the 15th of August issue of *The Hindu*, celebrating 60 years of Independence: “Our country forgot the great lessons of Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore. We only think of our own business and we do not represent a moral guidance anymore.”

India is a formidable cornucopia of dreams and nightmares, of trite clichés and exhausted exoticisms. More often than not we naive “Westerners” are the ones who create them, but India often serves them on a silver plate, enticing the consumer/reader with a sprinkling of turmeric, a rose fragrance, a shimmering silk sari. Pity that for decades nylon saris have been far more common than silk because they are cheaper and more durable, and rose fragrance wafts sublimely only in dargahs or in some five-star boutique hotels.

After several trips to the subcontinent, amazed by the voracity of transformations and the extent of some truly epic dramas, I finally had the chance to show a “version” of India which is less glossy and partisan than the one the triumphant journalistic vulgate dishes out to Italian readers everyday. The miracles of Chindia - the two superpowers China and India - and the feats of the “new nabobs” barely conceal the abysses of despair that the dazzling smiles of Indians cannot always hide.

In this perspective, I reckoned it would have been interesting to see this country from the point of view of those who were born and raised there, or thought about it from miles away (from London, New York or Singapore) and then went back home, maintaining that detached and, at the same time, sympathetic gaze – a sort of metaphorical third eye, an added value, an extra reading key.

No wonder many writers of this generation – whom I met in India or elsewhere, at book fairs and cinema festivals that spring up all over the world - want to get rid of commonplace stereotypes of little elephants in the logos of Made in India, of multi-coloured heaps of spices, of would-be gurus, and of western “aristofreaks” who roam India looking for a spiritual all-inclusive break.

They are fed-up with stories of arranged marriages, wicked mothers-in-law and submissive daughters-in-law which already invade both real life and the Second Life

of the incredibly popular soap-operas, not to mention Bollywood films, which have begun to gather cult followings in Italy or in Germany, while they have been popular in Africa or Japan for years (complete with translated lyrics to show off at karaokes).

In Europe we screen the most expensive and glam films, which, in content, are identical to those projected in movie theatres all over India, where something like 13 million people enjoy themselves everyday – eating, cheering, chatting, coming and going. They already know how the story goes.

In the field of literature we get the Midnight offspring – nearly all NRI, Non Resident Indians – Vikram Chandra, Suketu Mehta, Kiran Desai - and also, alas, a plethora of mediocre products, flavoured, as it often happens with insipid food, with excessively spicy sauces. Conversely, and I say this with regret, a tiny fraction of what is printed in India lands on the Italian market: very few books of great significance, which unfortunately disappear in our publishing bulimia. Not to mention the myriad of local languages - forming self-contained microcosms, or rather macrocosms, officially 22, considering that we talk about millions of readers, and strong readers, too – which have to be translated into English in order to emerge.

It would be interesting to investigate those authors writing in vernacular languages, but the obstacles are many and often of financial nature – scarcity of professional translators, no stars on Amazon, little publishing appeal. And then English, or rather English, contraction of India and English, which already was the lingua franca not only of high society but of the lower and upper middle class, is now simply trendy: it's the language of Bollywood, ads, national radios. Sixty years after independence, like it or not, English has become an Indian idiom.

I've spent most of my winters in India for the past twenty years. The reason for this is that I like it. I like the big cities and the remote village, and most of all, I like its people, their swift laughter and dancing eyes. I felt at home and I still do. And obviously I wanted to know more about a country where it's still possible to dream, despite everything – and for some, especially in urban areas, even to see some of their dreams come true.

Long before getting in touch with a number of writers in my humble but comfortable guise of literary translator, I just travelled, observing the reality of villages, "towns" with 300.000 people, cities and megalopolises. On endless train journeys, on lethal long-distance buses and in decrepit government-run hotels, I met teachers, clerks, activists, artists, filmdirectors, transsexuals, call-center operators, embroiderers and tea sellers; they were Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians and even some Jews (in Kochi, Kerala, where their numbers are fast dwindling.) And invariably, talking about their country, almost everyone would declare "I love my India" or "Our mother India is best."

In the past two or three years, however, more and more people kept repeating: "Our India becomes modern and rich, but the poor remain poor."

One day a young novelist I had met in Bombay sent me an e-mail that said: "All this talk about India booming is such nonsense... and the sad thing is that people living in shacks facing overflowing sewages will continue to believe in the revivalist myth perpetuated by the media whore. I don't think this country needs its feelers and thinkers now. The party is too wild and loud and everyone is busy milking the cow before it drops dead. When the capitalists have moved on to Africa or Greenland, they'll leave behind a barren, desolate land of chaos and litter crying to be cleaned up."

That's when I realized I wanted to capture an idea of people, daily life, real life in India. I guessed that writers of the new generation were ready to describe their reali-

ties without feeling the need to over-explain or translate their country. They had the urgency, as Arundhati Roy wrote: “to give meaning to stories and events which are maybe known but so minor that they don’t make History.”

What did these writers want to talk about then? The idea of taking a portrait of contemporary India was instantly appreciated; the authors I got in touch with in a very short time – six months altogether for research, selection, editing and translation – were enthusiastic. The choice of such a deadline was deliberate: I was interested in a snapshot of this precise historical period. And, of course, one could spend years combing the myriad of articles and short stories on the net. After a preliminary research and selection – from blogs, contacts provided by friends, anthologies published in India – I focused on a group of authors which, in most cases, had never been published in Italy and were working on their first book. I asked for unpublished material, not written on purpose for the anthology. I wanted to give them the opportunity to choose subjects they were keen on, so the guideline was basic – experiences and people in contemporary, urban India, fiction and non-fiction.

What emerged was quite an unexpected collage, a sequence of encounters on an imaginary path in a journey into reality: the history of a servant, the philosophy of life of a rickshaw driver, a porn director rebelling against the colonialism of Western sex stars, a young director forced to churn out bad documentaries to survive, the incredible transsexual community in Mumbai, a pair of brand jeans passing from hand to hand, photographic studios where you can make up a new identity...

Stories which are definitely far from family sagas and closer to social criticism – in different styles but not necessarily in angry tones: the mistrust in the institutions, the black hole of missing children, the urban decay of cities that foster centuries-old segregations at modern prices.

This was the layer of India I was interested in, the one just below the surface. Writers, journalists, directors, graphic-novelists helped me find it. Let them have their say.

## THE NAVJEEVAN EXPRESS

Tishani Doshi

### *Day One*

It is February, and we are armed for cool nights and warm days. We are armed like good Gujaratis with an assortment of boxes filled with food just in case we should find ourselves facing a disaster: a famine-infested state say, or thieving rats, or a derailed goods train along the way which will make our journey from Madras to Baroda take 66 hours instead of 33.

Mother, who hasn't travelled by train for over two decades has been harbouring fine, romantic notions for this trip: sunsets, rivers under bridges, platform life. "It'll be a picnic," she says.

The middle-aged couple sharing our 2nd class AC compartment are Rajasthani Marvadis who have come similarly armed with different accessories. They are travelling onwards from Baroda to Bikaner to visit their daughter.

The wife is in red: in a filmy chiffon sari and a blouse too small for her – exposing the tops of her breasts. She wears a diamond nose ring, earrings with chains hooked into her hair, red and gold bangles, anklets and toe-rings. She sits at the window with a big, smooth, brown belly. The husband has changed into travelling attire: lungi, long-sleeved shirt unopened over vest, rubber slippers. Two pens and the ubiquitous plastic comb in his shirt pocket. Bottle-thick glasses and a toothbrush moustache to disguise his uncompromisingly fat nose and weak lips. He takes note of the time on his gold HMT watch and then studies the Trains at a Glance with dedication.

Under the mirror in the cabin we share there is a fluorescent green advisory warning from the railway department pasted on the wall:

DON'T EAT FOOD FROM STRANGERS  
IT MAY BE DRUGGED

Mother and I take the left-hand berth and wait for our journey to begin. There is something exhausting about this inertia. The minutes are advancing but time hasn't really started. It's suspended, waiting for things to jolt forward: the clack of wheels, the sputtering engine. Even the coolies, after fleecing us, have deserted the bogey. They must be gathered at the local teashop; drinking tea, smoking bidis. When they finish they'll spit or piss or spray betel juice before running to the next arriving train. Even the boys who usually bring plates of steaming vadas or cups of coffee or chai are nowhere to be seen or heard. We have been abandoned in the afternoon heat with the railway's air-conditioning being well-conserved, left to swelter with languid fellow-passengers for a signal.

Four hours later the engine finally shrieks and pulls away from the platform. The man and his wife fold their hands and mutter a quick prayer of thanks.

Mother sits by the window watching things darken. She looks child-like almost, having shunned her saris long ago. Her wardrobe is full of long, colourful skirts now, and an assortment of black blouses in various sun-faded stages. She's smiling eagerly, in anticipation, as if she's a young girl about to embark on her first trip across the country. Only her white hair gives her away, and her skin, which in the last few years, has begun to sag slightly along the arms. Around her neck, I notice, she is wearing

the thick gold necklace which for many years we thought had been stolen by one of the cleaning maids. I discovered it in the far reaches of her cupboard when I returned home recently, wrapped in an old newspaper clipping of Marilyn Monroe.

The place of our first sunset is not far from the city. It is glorious, going down in a small town with a mosque and a lily pond on the railway platform. A beggar woman clutching a bag with all her belongings sits in front of it, the red embers of the last rays piercing into the skin of the sky. We stop here for three hours; long after the redness, long after the beggar woman has walked away, till only the crescent moon on top of the mosque can still be seen illuminated by the strange, yellow railway lights. Mother and I get off to walk, to stretch our legs. She must do this regularly, otherwise we'll have trouble.

Inside, the couple are drinking tomato soup from plastic cups. They drink noisily, slurping like vacuum cleaners. Afterwards, the husband gets up to make the beds: top berth for him and bottom berth for her. He lays the thick blanket down first, then the two layers of cotton sheets, then the pillow against the wall facing the corridor. He has graciously agreed to give mother his bottom berth. It is his duty, he says. Duty. I have not heard that word in a long time.

The wife unpacks their food bag, and arranges their dinner on one plate. They share their food, coaxing each other on. They eat quickly, efficiently; belch loudly to confirm they've finished. The woman takes away the plate to wash, and when she returns, the husband disappears with a plastic bag carrying a small square of pink soap. She stretches out to snore mercilessly as though she knows he'll be gone a long while.

Mother and I spread dinner out. I slide the pill box with the morning, afternoon and evening compartments into her view. I empty out the colourful contents of the evening section into her palm. Afterwards, I must check her mouth to make sure the large brown pill she hates isn't hiding between her molars. At home it's easy for her to wait till no one is in sight so she can retrieve it with her tongue and spit it out into the hibiscus bushes or under the bed, but here, she has no choice but to swallow it whole.

At night I lie across from the husband who sleeps on his back with his hands folded at his chest. I haven't had to share a room with anyone since boarding school. Even now, that I've returned to take care of mother, I don't sleep in her bedroom, but outside in the hall on a mattress, so I can hear if she gets up to go to the bathroom at night. It is strange to be lying across from someone I don't know at all – a man at that.

I wake many times because of the faltering air-conditioner which makes the compartment alternately stuffy and freezing cold. We stop for long stretches of time at stations whose names I can just about read: Reinigunta, Gooty, Guntakal, Raichur. Every time I look across at the man, he seems to be staring at me, propped against his pillow, unmoving. I have convoluted dreams.

### *Day Two*

We are up early. I have missed the sunrise but Mother hasn't. She never misses the sunrise. She looks well-rested with freshly applied red kumkum in the centre of her forehead and dark black kajal lining her eyes. We drink our requested coffee without sugar, while the couple drink tea with extra bags for colour.

Before breakfast the woman brings out her red-checked hanky and prayer beads.

She rubs the beads in her right hand and prays with eyes closed, pausing to pick her nose intermittently. When she is finished, she touches the beads to her glasses and passes them to her husband. He is better at it than she. He faces east, assumes the correct posture of lotus legs, forefinger in the crook of the thumb, and for the entire duration of his prayer does not flicker.

For breakfast they consume half a loaf of bread with butter, jam and chevda. The husband pouring the tea spills some of it out onto the plate. "Ishorry," he says. Just like he says, Ishtation, Ishoap, Ishuitcase.

Mother and I decide to follow their neat example and spread newspaper on the berth before taking out breakfast. At 10am we are still in Cuddapah, only six hours from Madras. We haven't travelled far at all.

I help mother put on her special stockings and we get out to walk. Mother stops at a pathetic, shrivelled-up plant. "Thookamoongi," she says, in delight. "It's a thookamoongi," she says again, "A sleepyface," pointing to its closed-up leaves. "It goes to sleep at 4 in the evening before any of the other plants, and see, it is sleeping still."

Mother must know the name of every Indian plant and tree in English, Sanskrit and Tamil. She has embraced them as if they were her own children. Incongruous how this sleepy-face manages to rest on the railway platform teeming with beggars and vendors, old men and disregarded women. It will grow up to have powder puff flowers; if it grows up at all. For now it is surrounded by plastic cups and empty Colgate boxes.

For the rest of the morning there is much noise: throat-clearing, snoring, belching, farting, slurping, chewing. The husband talks with surprising calm about the journey. Once in a while, he'll corner the conductor and ask if we're being re-routed north or if we'll resume the original route. But he expresses no real concern or angst about the delay even though he is sure to miss his connecting train. The wife sits bitterly by the window poring over a film magazine or stretched out on three-fourths of the lower berth while her husband meticulously calculates distances covered, distances to go and refunds to be demanded from the Indian Railway, careful all the while not to disturb her feet.

We are roaming the middle of India, circling Andhra Pradesh, past villages and heaps of rock. We've left behind the luminous paddy fields of Tamil Nadu, the banana trees and dark tobacco-growing soil. It is all brown and rubble-dry here, but further ahead there's the promise of hills, maybe a velvet patch of green where a man with his bullock will plough his field under a roof of blue sky. And maybe after this, fruit trees will appear.

But for now there's only a bridge and a dried-up riverbed which mother looks at sadly. Women on the opposite side of the bridge sit huddled in fields with covered heads. The husband puts aside his *Trains at a Glance*. On the back of it is an advertisement for tractors, "Nature: to Relish not Ravage," it says.

He pulls out his suitcase which is carefully locked with a chain to the berth. He brings out a folder of papers and relocks the case. "I am clearing agent," he announces. "I work at Madras port, clearing Iships. What you are doing in Madras?"

"We are both teachers," answers mother.

"And why you are speaking in English, not Tamil?"

"Oh, we speak to each other in many languages," says mother mystically, then leans against her window with closed eyes, signalling the end of the conversation.

At lunch the woman brings out a Tupperware box of spiced potatoes, that smells to our deadened air-conditioned senses, divine. Mother, who has perked up, asks in

Hindi whether it is home-made.

The woman smiles for the first time during this journey. She rattles off how she was berated at home by her husband and son for spending so much time cooking. But now, she says triumphantly, now he will enjoy the food. There is nothing like home-cooked food.

Mother and I agree, nodding at our meagre leftover tamarind rice from the night before. "Please take," she offers. "No, No, it's all right," we say.

After this meal we will have to order railway food and substantiate it with snacks. I'm not looking forward to the tin foil trays of nutrition-less white rice, oily puris, unrecognizable vegetables and sour curds. The last reports we've had about arriving in Baroda have been pessimistic.

At six we sigh, waiting for the sun to set. By this time we should have reached Baroda. We should have been met at the station and carried off promptly towards the clinic, towards hot baths and fresh towels. Instead, we sit with greasy hair tied back in rubber bands. I catch mother at the basin trying to lift her legs under the tap to wash them.

"I have to have my feet clean," she says, looking guilty but determined.

"All right," I say, "But you could have asked for my help. You look like you're going to topple over like that."

She glowers at me. "I'm fine. You know I can't sleep with dirty feet."

We play rummy while the husband and wife exchange stories about train thefts. The husband points to the sign under the mirror and says, "It happened to our daughter and son-in-law."

"Oh?" asks Mother, interested at last.

"Biscuit bandits," the man continues, "Not only did they lose all their money and jewels, they also had to be hospitalized for one month. Now we are going to Ishee them for the first time."

This explains the paranoia with the locks and chains.

I've been watching the man. How at each station he gets off and buys something: bottled water, buttermilk, ice cream, grapes, bananas, oranges. He brings back these treasures and lays them like an offering on the table for his wife, waiting for approval. It does not come. He watches us play cards longingly, and I am tempted to ask if he'd like to join, but then the woman might want to join too and we wouldn't have enough cards to play. The woman rises, eats, sleeps, rises, eats, sleeps. Once in while she lifts up one side of her bottom, as though it were nothing at all, and releases a burst of pungent wind. She arranges and re-arranges their food supplies, grimaces if we have taken up more than half the space of the table with our things. Mother drops their butter by mistake before dinner.

This sets the woman off.

"All this time I've been quiet," she says in Hindi. "You are older, you should know these things. Travelling like this you can at least try to make it as nice as possible. Now what shall we do?"

She picks up the slab of butter and tries to dust it off. "All this time I've been quiet. You keep dropping our things. First the pickle, now the butter. You are older, you should know better."

As if by reiterating this point of age she'll get it through mother's skull.

Mother looks at me with a faint smirk. "Such women control their men through the stomach," she says, lifting her troubled legs onto the seat with disdain as if to show that she has never been that kind of woman.

“They don’t understand universality,” she says, putting on her reading glasses, turning to the pages of her book.

The husband, meanwhile, maintains the same placid look on his face. I am disappointed. I thought his Duty would barge in and signal his wife to show a little more respect. But perhaps mother is right. Perhaps he is controlled.

At the next stop a young boy comes in to clean the dustbin and the bathrooms. He is shirtless and wears tattered brown pants. When he leans over to collect the rubbish, his back is arched like a sliver of a crescent moon, shiny and incandescent. The husband gives him a couple of rupees. The wife is on the platform standing with her arms folded looking crossly at a group of hijras – man-woman neither-here-nor-there creatures who are squabbling and joking in brilliant saris, looking proud and disgruntled simultaneously.

The tension remains till nightfall. All of us have ordered railway food for dinner.

Mother and I face each other solemnly while the couple carry on with less banter than usual. After dinner we talk about civilizations. Mother tells me how they’ve discovered an ancient site near Baroda that is supposed to pre-date Harappa and Mohenjodaro. It would put us at 7500 BC – older than the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Babylonians, the Mesopotamians, the Sumerians. She talks with bright eyes of her travels. “Always walk alone,” she tells me.

We talk of the darkness of Japanese literature and Pharonic art. At night I dream of long brown torsos, black eyes and sloping shoulders. A fisher-boy at Thebes.

### *Day Three*

Mornings are filled with such hope. Such release. To look outside the window of a train moving in a direction of its own; to watch the sun colour the sky of an unfamiliar landscape – it is like being given the ropes to unravel a dream; to understand your life in a new, impossible way.

I saw my childhood out there, my first lover. I saw the woman I’ve been and want to become. I saw them picking their hopes off the ground and putting them on their backs to carry. I saw a lonely man pedal his bicycle down a mud road in silence, and I thought how he must hear differently: the sound of the clattering train, the oppressive stones on his path, the heat, the whispering crops.

If someone who believes in prayer prays for a journey to be safe, do other people – non-believers, get protected by default?

Buffaloes, storks, rock.

I’m surprised mother is still enjoying this. She has remarkably not made a fuss at all. This was her idea and she’s determined to see it through. The ticket conductor has come by to tell us that the train will arrive in Baroda at 8 this evening. A whole day ahead of us seems unbearable. But at least we’re finally out of the coils of Andhra Pradesh.

The landscape has changed. Everything looks like a scene from the end of the world. In the morning the smell of shit, and at night the smell of burnt rubber and fuse boxes. This journey has forced intimacy upon us. It has been impossible to be self-indulgent.

Mother and I have been making fun of our companions, laughing under the pages of our books at their noises and cooing. We say nothing of how they are used to each other’s habits, nothing of the way they bend and bolster themselves for one another while our own relationship keeps shifting uneasily in the dark.

The husband is obsessed with lines: where they will go, where they will take us, how quickly one will take us to another, whether the tracks are single or double. Lines connecting people and places. It is pure fantasy in his head. He's travelling to all these places, skimming over the tracks like the telegraph lines that cut through the windows of the train and the heads of trees. He attempts humour – says how kind it is of the railways not to charge us for this free day of travel. A weak effort to make up for his wife's outburst about the butter.

Children have suddenly appeared, noisy and dirty, mimicking the sound of trains in tired voices, in straggly plaits and soiled clothes. Men walk around with stubbles and full beards, and women go around with a slightly stale smell about them.

I know we are in Gujarat now because the cows here are beautiful, gracious; their horns perfectly shaped for hooking on to the sky. Village women are everywhere, unashamedly feeding children at their breast, carrying bronze pots of water amidst swirls of red dupattas. One of them looked at me with a silver tikka on her forehead and I felt she must know everything about my life.

We sit with cards and books at our side. We have run out of things to say to each other. We have eaten, we have slept, we have washed ourselves in the filthy basin and used the hole in the toilet for relief. We have left our crumpled sheets and newspapers behind.

A few more hours of travel. Mother is standing by the open door watching the sunset on the opposite side of the train. Finally, proof that we have crossed the great girth of this peninsula. Her white hair is streaming behind her. I'm scared she will fall out, fly away to some place we've left behind. I'm scared I will not find her.

"They should build prisons by railways stations," she says, "or hospitals, so that inmates can look at the trains passing by, hear the sound of the wind underneath the rails, imagine the lives of the people travelling and the places they're travelling to; all the things they can no longer do."

I stand behind her as she waits for more familiar names: Manmad, Jalgaon, Surat.

She was here a long time ago. Her parents were here a long time ago. All that is here is part of her. She began somewhere here, and so I too begin somewhere among these ancient ruins and buried cities. How have we both moved so far from this place to a city with a sea instead of a desert?

I take her inside and we gather up our belongings, putting them into plastic covers and nylon bags. Mother turns to me and says, "I saw that woman this morning when I woke up. She was lying with the sheets around her. Her breasts had spilled out of her blouse and her red sari had fallen away. Her petticoat had risen up and you know, she wasn't wearing anything underneath. I was so surprised. Her hair was open – wild. And she was just lying there like a ruined country, completely open to everything."

"Yes," I say, "Yes, I saw that too."

"It was a mistake to come," says mother, "I want to die in my own home, by my sea, my sky. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I say, "Yes. We can always turn back."

We sit down facing each other with this knowledge; with the fake smell of powder and perfume on us, waiting for the approaching lights of Baroda.

Sample taken from:

*"India Shining, India changing". Contemporary Stories*, edited by Gioia Guerzoni, Tranquebar Press (India), 2009