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## Four Sketches

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# Four Sketches

*PETER SCHNEIDER*

## The Indian Road

The superhighway is an American invention, and the cloverleaf approach, the cyclone fence, the sign that says "Pedestrians Forbidden," are hard to imagine transplanted in India. If their roads had signs they would say, "Cars, buses, and trucks beware!" for they are the usurpers. The farmer walking behind a pair of water buffaloes, the sadu carrying a staff and a bowl, a wandering goat or a cow, a jutka or an ox cart, and most of all, villagers walking to and from town; they are the ones who belong.

As such they deserve and take the middle of the road, but this doesn't bother the driver. When there is something ahead of him he blows the horn and keeps blowing until he is past it, swerving, accelerating, braking, whenever the situation demands. Sometimes the object won't move and then the driver stops and waits until it does. It might be a disinterested brahma bull or a self-righteous bicycler; the driver doesn't care. He gets there on time no matter when he arrives.

Needless to say, American passengers are not as philosophical and have considerably less patience. The constant implication that their time is less important than a cow's irritates them as much as the horn blowing does. I often heard remarks about "teaching those cows a lesson or two," until one day the bus passed two white bulls hemorrhaging in the road. Their wish had come true. After that they bore their resentment in silence.

Railroad crossings were the other pet peeve. By government law, an Indian crossing must be closed at least ten minutes before a train is scheduled to pull through—though the trains are normally late—and all the time the train is in the station. To enforce the law, each crossing is assigned several guards who are to lock the gate and then lock the key up. As most tracks handle only a few trains a day, the guards take their duty quite seriously. When the gate closes, you wait. (In comparison, the Japanese have no gates and guards, but when the light flashes, they stop and stay stopped until a train comes through, usually in about a minute. Even pedestrians wait. In America the bell rings ten seconds before the train is due and then cars don't stop unless they can see the train coming.)

Most Indians are delighted with the unexpected break in routine. They hop off the trucks to talk with other drivers, or doze under the occasional roadside tree. The ox cart drivers sleep in the seat. Sometimes an ambitious farmer or goat herder will decide not to wait and will drive his animals off the road and across the tracks where the fence ends, usually about ten yards away. The pedestrians walk right through. So the American is left with the machines and the sleeping to mumble about backwardness and waste. It's not that he is in a hurry, but he must get by that gate, symbolizing as it does all that is stagnant and Indian. At one gate an angry American marched up to the guard and demanded they open up, and they did. The rest of us cheered. It was a great victory. He must have really frightened them. Who but an incarnation of Vishnu would dare to question the wisdom of the government?

Indian novelist R. K. Narayan questions our wisdom, and thinks that our road problem is more serious than India's. India may not have highways, thruways and freeways, but at least her roads have people. In America, Narayan says, all one sees is miles of machines driving behind, in front of, or at one another. What could be more inhuman, more depressing? Isn't it more reasonable to wait for a man chasing a cow than to stop for a stop light? Though steel and concrete are inborn in me, I have to agree that it is.

## Sadu-Baba

The traditional Indian village has one or two families from each professional caste that have lived there for centuries and are guaranteed support from the other villagers by unwritten law. For anyone to cut his own hair or carry away the household garbage would be treasonable; the system would collapse! Many villages also have a Sadu, a Hindu holy man, whose function is to act wise and give advice in return for food and shelter. The requirements are that he be a Brahmin, unless he is a Gandhi or Buddha, and that he renounce the world. As this includes his family usually, it doesn't matter where he is from. According to legend, he wanders in from the forest.

One noon when I was stranded in a air-conditioned railroad car in upper East Bengal, a friend came in and asked if I would like to meet a Sadu. Sadu-baba (most revered wiseman), as he called himself, had approached the friend on the platform and asked him over to his house.

The house we found was two four-by-six rooms opening out onto a dirt street. Sadu-baba came out to greet us, and after musing on general spiritual problems for a few minutes, told us his history. He had come here eight years ago from Calcutta where he had been a minor civil servant. His wife and daughter still lived there; the wife with her family, the daughter with her husband. The remainder of his family was here; a mother whom he never went to see, but asked about every day. She was his last earthly bond, he said, and when she was dead, he would be free, to go to America even, if he wished.

He asked us inside. Of the two rooms, one was for eating and sleeping (someone had left him two mangoes towards lunch) and the other for religion. The latter also doubled as a lounge, but enough space was given to icons and relics and altars that only two could fit in. I had to look in from the living room.

From there I could see the altar. On it, amid the five-storied clutter, were three skulls, three lingums, several stacks of religious pictures and postcards, stubs of candles, prayer beads of four or five varieties, and decaying vegetables. Sadu-baba was anxious to make a distinction between his and ordinary skulls. His came from murderers

that were hung, and were more valuable because while normal spirits go over to the other side immediately, murderers don't. Because they died unnaturally, they are doomed to wander in the void between heaven and earth and thus are easier to contact. The sadu prayed to them every day for this reason. They are a connection with heaven.

He was proud of his picture cards too. Among them were romantic portraits of Christ and Buddha, Ramakrishna and Ganesha, Shiva and Kali, et al. To Sadu-baba all Gods were the same and he worshipped them all indiscriminately.

Next he brought out his letters. He had three he wanted us to see. As it turned out, all were from 1956. The first two were from the wives of university professors in the States. Both said he should come to America to teach. The third was from the Indian government acknowledging receipt of Sadu-baba's plan for political reform. He explained it to us. To industrialize when the people are starving is stupid. They must be fed rice now, not steel in the future (the words are mine). Here is where America comes in. Since it is our money the Indian government has misspent, we are responsible for finding better uses for it in the future. One way would be to send money to Sadu-baba. And what then, asked my friend. First thing, Sadu-baba said, is to build a temple.

Finally he passed out copies of his leaflet, half a foolscap mimeographed on one side in English and the other in Bengali. The gist of his message was this: I am an excellent palmist and dedicated sadu with a keen insight into politics. Please write.

But I am not fair. Sadu-baba was both intelligent and sincere. As we were leaving, a disturbed looking man came up and stood behind us. When I asked about him, Sadu-baba said that he was crazy and had come for lunch, which today meant one mango. At that point we tried to give him money and hire him as our guide for the afternoon, but he refused. He said he didn't take money or sell himself out, and though he might guide us as friends, he couldn't, because the villagers might judge him for it. We could, however, send him a bucket of rice and curry from the station to feed his friend. Agreeing, we walked away. He stood and waved, his belly protruding out from under the sacred thread.

## A Haircut

“Dozo” she said, and walked me to her chair, there to robe me in four soiled sheets before an oxidized mirror. I was a little nervous because I couldn’t tell her that I didn’t want my hair to look like the fellow’s next to me; like a white sidewall with bristles for treads. I resolved to watch her closely and interject “Hei” and “E-yeh” at the critical moments. Unfortunately she had a thick straight body and a blank face, and so when she pulled out a pair of hand clippers and laid them on the counter, I was ready to leap from the chair and find a hotel barber. But before I could muster courage, she had wrapped my head in hot towels. Like Samson, I didn’t have a chance. Realizing it, I accepted my fate and let her begin. She worked very methodically around one side to the other, doing each section over and over, taking off just enough, and when her fifteen minute cycle was completed I was satisfied. Not she, and instead of stopping, continued around again, then again, and again—I don’t know how many times, for I was falling asleep. The space about my head buzzed with her victorious activity. Dozing was my only defense. I opened one eye it’s true when she was working on the top, but only for a moment. She treated my hair as if it were precious, and as I am balding quickly as it is, how could I withhold my confidence? My head would never have forgiven me.

Finally she was finished and I straightened up to leave. But before my foot got to the floor, she stepped in from behind to pull my shoulders back into the chair, and fell to pounding my neck, carrying her blows up my scalp and down past my shoulderbone. I could feel the body slowly pouring down into the chair while the head stood proudly behind, floating alone, and the rest of me yearned to follow. By the time she started on the shampoo, the body had arrived. Together they danced, my body and head, to the bubbles from the soap being massaged into the scalp. When she was ready to take me to the sink, I had forgotten where I was. But what could be more logical than to play under a faucet? So I wandered over before her, leaned into the basin, and slept some more, confident that when it was shiny, she would grip the halo and lead me back to the chair. Who had a better right? And sure enough, in a while I was home again being dried.

This done she lowered the back of the chair, and I slid into a horizontal position. There I lay in oblivious submission while she lathered my face, forehead included, and, wrapping it in a steaming towel, eased the lather into the skin with her fingertips. Then she

removed the towel, lathered me again, and started to shave. Slowly I became conscious of a slight pain in my neck and chin. I found out later that the Japanese like a closer shave than the Marines do, and will work over and over a spot until nothing greyish shows. One friend with an extra heavy beard let it grow for two months after his first Japanese shave. By the time she was through I was wide awake. Another hot towel relaxed my overly taut skin and allowed me a final fantasy before re-entering reality for good. Thus at ease, I watched with indifference as she fluffed and combed the hair into her temporary masterpiece. Then off came the dirtier towels, and out she led me with slight bows and "*Domo arigato.*" "Thank you," said my honored head. "You are the first to understand."

## Eiheiji Monastery

In Spring the Eiheiji River is a torrent of melted snow, pine boughs, and mountain stones that leave backwashes and clogged falls and littered banks for the water to wind through in Summer. Then in August the monks come to clean her.

For this I needed boots, they insisted, pointing to the shoes I wore—my only pair—and Tetzusan-san went looking. All the boots at the monastery, though, are size eight and since I wear a ten and a half, no matter how many pairs he brought, none of them would fit. I tried them all anyway, amid jokes of cutting my toes off with a gardening knife, until the monks were convinced of my hopelessness, and let me put my shoes back on.

Most of the others had already gone to the river and when I got there, they were working, some raking the clogged leaves from the stream, others clearing the rubbish from the sides and carrying it away. As usual I didn't know what to do, since I couldn't speak Japanese, and so I climbed down to the water looking for someone to copy. Not having boots was a handicap. I couldn't walk in the water and the banks were too slippery for my leather soles. Then I noticed that part of the work was to pull the stones from the shallows where twigs would catch and throw them to the sides. I

thought that by sitting on a big rock that projected above water and reaching down, maybe I could do this. However, this proved impractical since I couldn't reach very far. But I liked the job, so I took off one shoe and put one foot in the water, keeping the other on the rock. This made it easier, though the water was very cold, and in five minutes I had the other shoe off too. Now I stood in midstream, straddling the shallows and throwing the rocks in either direction; I noticed that every stone I removed left a new hole for the water to flow through and literally recreated the stream as the water found an easier way to go. Watching this, I became less and less conscious of the developing aches in my feet and fingers and back. Soon I was unaware of doing anything. The stones moved themselves as much as I did, one after another, until what had been a broad ripple was now a rapids, with a greater flow and with a unique simplicity. The river was becoming free. For two hours I backed my way downstream.

At one point I stopped to clear a backed-up channel; stones had wedged in between a huge boulder in midstream and the shore, and dirt and sand had collected behind them to form a weed covered dam—and a cove of stagnant water. They looked almost natural, except there wasn't any flow. The monks had passed them by but, like a child playing in sand, I had to dig to the water. First I pried stones from the front face and dug a narrow channel in the sand on top until a trickle of water fell through, then worked from that, pulling fifty pound boulders, raking pebbles with my finger tips, loosening one stone by wiggling four others, yanking out rotten branches, always knowing instinctively what to do next. Seeing the waterfall grow I felt like I had caught nature undressing. It was like uncovering a lost nude of a forgotten artist. I had never done anything as valid before, and I was doing nothing but my work. And when the river had become herself, with what power she surged through me! How do you explain creation?

The next day I couldn't touch anything, my fingers were so sore. No blisters had formed, but half my fingerprints were gone. However, I was to leave the monastery the following day and was excused from work to visit the Zen Master. First he asked me what I thought of Eihei-ji. I couldn't find an answer at first and said I didn't know, but then later added; "Eihei-ji has good zazen (meditation practice), but I am not Eihei-ji." To which he answered; "No, you are. When you return to America you must find some rivers to clear."

