

The traffic in Patna is, as expected, chaotic but soon we reach 0 mile. This is the place where the "4-lane" toll road begins. "4-lane" is not so much as a descriptor but a concept. Roads are divided into two categories- 4-lane and bad roads. This is what I found out whenever I enquired from Ashiq Miyan, our driver, about how far it is and long it takes between any two places in Bihar.

We are driving from Patna to Munger, a distance of about 165 kilometers. The toll road is well maintained and has little traffic. In fact, this is something I noticed all along. On major highways in other parts of the country, there is always a regular stream of commercial vehicles- busses, trucks, shared auto rickshaws as well as tractors. The road we are travelling on is National Highway 80 and is a major artery connecting two big cities in the state- Patna and Bhagalpur and yet there is hardly any commercial traffic even though the road is very good.

But it was not to last- the road is 4-lane only for about 40 kilometers and then reverts to a regular, potholed, two lane highway for the rest of the trip. Almost all the way, we are parallel to the river Ganga, at a distance of a few hundred yards from its south bank. The main stream of the Ganga has moved a few kilometers north, leaving a riverine island stretch known as the *diara*. The whole distance, it is hard to find an uninhabited stretch of land- a continuous stream of villages and settlements runs all the way. One the other side of the road is low lying area which gets inundated and is water logged for several months of the year. Thus, the habitation is restricted to the roadside by the river on one side and water logged stretch on the other side.

The fecundity of the land has to be seen to be believed- there is literally not a single meter of land which is not cultivated. Even a ten square meter piece of land between the road and the house is tilled. And the houses all have vines laden with pumpkins and other squashes lying on the roof or hanging perilously. This stretch of land next to the river, I am told, is one of the most fertile pieces of agrarian real estate in the world.

And yet, there seems to be no sign of any development. The houses are dilapidated and one sees an overall sense of decay. The usual signs of state intervention are there- the two storied middle school which has the same design in all the villages that I saw, a police post, a dispensary etc. But the state of these buildings is equally dismal. But what is more surprising is the lack of commercial activity. The most visible marker of this is the absence of any wall painted advertisements that one finds next to a highway when one travels in northern India- advertisements for Kribhco Urea, mobile companies, FMCG companies and of course the ubiquitous doctor for sex related problems. None of these are visible as we drive.

As it gets dark, one is struck by the complete darkness. The villages and habitation are completely invisible. Once in a while, one comes across a "line hotel" with solar powered LED lamps. But otherwise it is as if one is passing through uninhabited land instead of a

stretch which has among the highest population densities in the world. In this universe of darkness there is the Barh thermal power plant- a glowing campus with cooling towers and power houses producing 800 MW of power. It must be the development model chosen by us that we don't think there is anything wrong with the villages next to this huge campus being shrouded in darkness. This power is not for them.

The road is bad but the sparse traffic on the undivided road means we can still do reasonable time. We reach Barahiya, a small town which was a major agricultural *mandi* for *dal*. The main bazaar has the usual small shops with merchandise for the neighbouring villages. The town must have been fairly prosperous at one time since some of the buildings are large and imposing. We stop at one such *haveli* which belongs to a Marwari family from Kolkata. The family was in the agricultural processing and trading business in the town but given the lawlessness in Bihar had shut its business and moved back to Kolkata. The *haveli* is magnificent- huge and well maintained by a large retinue of servants. The courtyard in the middle with a *tulsi* plant and a double storied structure with rows of rooms on all sides reminds me of the setting for family dramas made by AVM productions in the 1950s.

The final stretch of the road to Munger is not so bad and we finally make it to the circuit house in the late evening. Located on top of a small hill and surrounded by a mini-forest of young trees (planted under some rural development social forestry scheme by an ecologically minded district collector) it is a charming building. The inside is the standard circuit house lay out- 4 suites opening up into a lounge and a dining area. The suites have a large room with twenty feet high ceiling, a fire place as well as a dressing room and a bath which is larger than an apartment in Mumbai! The lay out and the architecture is colonial but the fittings and the furniture is ultra-modern, functional-minimalist -Godrej Interio!

As is usual, the circuit house has a large staff- either on the rolls or just hangers on. Apart from the *chowkidar* and the *khansama*, there are several people one notices hanging around in the verandah in the morning when we set out for a walk around the city to the Ganga. Munger is the district headquarters of the district by the same name. It is located on top of a rocky outgrowth in the Ganga and is like a peninsula jutting into the river. It is considered holy because apart from Varanasi, it is the only place where the normally West to East flowing Ganga flows north for some distance, that is *Uttar Vahini Ganga*. The town is located inside a fort which is believed to have been built by Mir Qasim who fled here after being defeated by Clive at Plassey. The only remnants of the fort that are visible now are the three gateways and some portions of the wall and the moat surrounding it.

We walk through the civil lines to the ghats. The civil lines, like all civil lines in district towns has a distinct character. There are several colonial buildings surrounded by large gardens and compounds and wide tree lined roads. And then there is a ghastly building which we find out is the State Museum. Why is it that even with all the technology, we don't seem to be able to build structures which are pleasing to the eye, never mind long-lasting?

There is the ubiquitous Company Bagh now called Jay Prakash Udhyan. There is also a large ground where several games of cricket and football are being played concurrently. This is something which is becoming rare in towns now- a large open space which can be used by the public, with no infrastructure except a flat piece of land. People will use it for a variety of things- playing, jogging, walking or just plain hanging out. Instead, our planners now plan for Sports Centers and Gyms which might be well equipped but restrict the entry of common people- one has to be a member and have an agenda to go there. Having public spaces which people use as they deem fit seems no longer in vogue.

The *Kashtharini Ghat* has few people. The main stream of the river has moved several kilometers to the north and there is a small branch which now runs past the *ghats* here. This part of the river is not much to speak of though we spot a solitary Ganga Dolphin diving in the waters though. One can see the newly constructed rail cum road bridge some distance to the East. I am told that the bridge is ready but the approach roads and the railway line is under construction.

On our way back to the circuit house we stop at a charming old bungalow on the way. The two storied bungalow was built in the early part of the century and then after independence, sold to a friend's family by the Scotswoman who inherited it. It is a fascinating house with a lot of old, colonial furniture and a beautiful garden which is filled with seasonal winter flowers. Our friend's mother reminisces about the days when the bungalow used to be filled with activity- she now lives alone in the house with a retinue of servants.

Mr. Yogeshwar, the District Public Relations Officer (DPRO) has been assigned to show me the sights in and around the city though there is not much to see. As we go towards the *Pir Pahad* in a Scorpio, Mr. Yogeshwar gives me a running commentary on his life and work! *Pir Pahad* is the highest point in the city, overlooks the river and has an old, dilapidated *mahal*, built by Mir Qasim's general Gurgin Khan but has now been appropriated by Doordarshan for its TV tower. There is also the eponymous *mazhar* of the Pir where some urchins are playing with empty Bisleri bottles. The view of the river is good though one can't see much because of the mist and fog.

Our next stop is Sita Kund, a complex of hot springs on the outskirts of the town. Legend has it that this is the place where the Agni Pariksha of Sita was held. The other ponds are called Ram Kund, Bharat Kund, Lakshman Kund and Shatrughan Kund. The place seems deserted though I am told that in the month of Magh (roughly January) a huge *mela* takes place here attracting thousands of devotees. The Kund itself is clean and as an old *pundit* who has joined us in the hopes of some donation explains, it is hot for 9 months of the year and then in the summer months is cold! The other ponds or springs are stagnant water filled with algae and the usual refuse- empty packets of chips, empty Bisleri bottles, innumerable pan masala sachets etc.

We drive through the railway town of Jamalpur, which is in a way the twin city of Munger. Here, in 1862, the East India Railway Company established a railway workshop. The workshop had a school for apprentices which has now become the Indian Railways Institute for Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. The town is clearly divided into two parts, the railway part and the regular town. The railway portion of the town has old colonial buildings, typical of any railway town. There are also several churches including one dating from 1876.

I asked several people about why the Britishers decided on this town to establish a railway workshop- after all it is not terribly close to the then seat of power, Calcutta. I couldn't get a convincing answer, but a plausible answer could be the presence of many experienced gunsmiths in Munger.

Munger has always been famous for gun making and there still is a gun factory located next to the circuit house. It says something about the state of industrialization in Bihar that Munger is considered to be the most industrialised cities of Bihar. Apart from the Railway workshop at Jamalpur, there is also the oldest cigarette manufacturing plant now run by ITC as well as the gun factory. ITC is constructing its first dairy plant also in Munger. Given all this industry, one would imagine the town of Munger would be somewhat more prosperous than it seems.

The gates of Ganga Darshan, the campus of the Bihar School of Yoga remind me of the doorway to a fort. The gates are large and imposing and the boundary walls high and daunting. The impression one gets is that of a monastery where the cloistered monks want to be secluded from the world. A young man wearing saffron clothes (everyone in the campus wears saffron) stops us and informs us that we are not allowed in. Mr. Yogeshwar, my escort, in an officious tone tells him that he has spoken with the swamiji. The novice is not impressed and tries to confirm it on the walkie-talkie that he is carrying. In the meantime, Mr Yogeshwar connects the swamiji on his phone and makes him speak to the novice. It is only after this that the doorway is opened for us to enter. Mobiles are not allowed in the campus but we being guests of swamiji are allowed to take our phones with us.

The campus is huge- at least 5 large, multistoried buildings and a main administrative building apart from meditation hall, gardens and vegetable plots. The whole place is extremely well maintained by the inmates- there are no hired staff in the campus I am told. The main hall with the office is teeming with saffron- people from all over the world are here. The swamiji assigns a junior sanyasi to show us around and tell us about the place. The only Indians I see in the campus are a few monks. The place, it seems discourages local students. The School, which is now a deemed university runs residential courses of various durations on Yoga. Everything is well organized and seems to run like clockwork. The squalor and chaos outside the gates seems miles away from this spiritual haven. And yet,

there seems to be something missing in this well-oiled machinery- somehow the aura, the ambience, and the atmosphere does not evoke any serenity or spirituality. It all seems too regimented and imposed from without for it to be genuinely peaceful. The well-kept gardens, the solar lights, the hushed tones of the inmates- it all gives a feeling of being in an elite boarding school rather than a place to introspect and connect with one's inner being.

That there was something amiss about the whole place was reinforced when I found out that a large part of the land on which the School is built is illegally occupied. But given the political clout of the School, nothing has been done by the administration. The District Magistrate also lamented that the School does little by way of interacting or integrating with the local community. Thus, for instance, students are forbidden to leave the campus during their stay.

The trip back to Patna is uneventful except for a short stop to inspect a "Vasudha Kendra". These are centers established by the Bihar government in the Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode to facilitate the delivery of citizen services to the populace. This center, which runs from a roadside shack, had a computer connected to the Internet, a printer and a diesel generator given the vagaries of electric supply. The idea is that the citizen would not need to go to a government office to get information, certificates and other documents. Once the back-end infrastructure of digitized records, security and other framework is in place, the citizen would get all the things that s/he needs from these kinds of facilitation centers. Of course, they would also serve as B2C centers providing services like railway and bus tickets etc.

The problem of course is that though the Centers are up and running (though with all the connectivity and training of personnel issues), the back-end infrastructure is nowhere near ready. This then makes these centers superfluous as facilitation nodes and instead they are more like Internet cafes which anyway are functional in most places. Another example of an ambitious scheme which doesn't take into account ground realities.

Back in Patna, I go to see the Didarganj Yakshi at the Patna Museum. The Museum, built in 1912 is a large building right in the heart of the city. The pride of the place is of course the Didarganj Yakshi, a 3rd century BCE life sized sculpture in Chunar sandstone which was found at Didarganj, a small hamlet near Patna. The story goes that the statue's base was being used by a washerwoman for cleaning clothes. It was only when the villagers, trying to chase a snake dug around it that they discovered this priceless artefact.

The curator of the museum takes me around and in a manner reminiscent of Raju guide, breathlessly explains the import of each object, including its real or imagined and embellished history. The collection, of which only about 5% is displayed, is very impressive though as with most museums in the country, the display is poor. The collections include many statues and terracotta objects as well as the collection of President Rajendra Prasad which he donated to the Museum. The curator then gets a locked room opened for me. This

room has a glassed enclosure which is said to hold the ashes of Buddha which were found at the stupa in Vaishali in 1958.

However, the most amazing part of the library for me is the section devoted to Rahul Sankrityan. The famed polymath donated a large part of his collection of manuscripts and paintings collected during his extensive travels to the museum. The manuscripts are being digitized and translated with the help of Tibetan scholars. The thankas which he had collected in Tibet were absolutely breathtaking.

In the evening, I go to the Bankipore Club, the watering hole for the elite of the city. Established in the late 19th century, the club is clearly well past its sell-by date. The lawns, the bar, the tables, the walls all display signs of decay and poor maintenance. As soon as we enter the bar, we are surrounded by a horde of waiters- much like the autorickshaw drivers who descend upon you when you exit from a railway station in North India. It turns out that the catering services have been given to several different contractors each of whom send their waiters to try and grab your custom before the other one does. The whole performance seems quite comic and bizarre.

On the final day, I traverse through the horrendous Patna traffic to go to the famous Khuda Baksh Oriental Library. This library, which started as a private collection of rare manuscripts, was taken over by the government in 1969 by an act of parliament. The building is fairly non-descript and one could have easily passed by it without noticing. But the treasures inside are amazing. Rare manuscripts, folios of paintings, photographs and even scientific instruments- the place is a treasure house. The official there shows me around and then also opens up a cupboard for me to see and feel some of the rare manuscripts. The really rare ones, like a 9th century manuscript in Kufi script is kept in a huge safe (built almost a hundred years ago by some eminent safe makers in Coventry), which opens with two keys- one of which is with the director and the other with the governor of Bihar (who is the ex officio chairperson).

Since the University is next to the library, I ask the driver to drive me through it. Patna university was once one of the premier universities in the country. But, as is evident from looking at it, it has not escaped the fate of most other institutions in the country- the signs of decay are everywhere. At the Patna Science College, once considered to be one of the best in the country, I venture into the Physics Department. The building is old and majestic but essentially in shambles. The corridors are dark, dirty and dinghy. The laboratories are locked since it is vacation time but even from outside, I can see that the place is in an advanced stage of decay. I need to use the restroom and find one next to the Head of the Department's office. The door says, "ONLY FOR TEACHERS" and I expect it to be somewhat clean. Alas, it is in the same state as a toilet at a railway station. And like the University of Delhi, I know that it is not because of lack of resources. Money there is plenty but somehow we just don't seem to have a culture of maintaining, leave alone improving

our institutions. We can only destroy what we have inherited. Dirty toilets, dark corridors, non-functioning equipment in the laboratories, broken desks and chairs in the classrooms, unkempt lawns- this is the state of most of our institutions. As I only jokingly comment to my friend, it must be the Indo Gangetic plains. Because the plains were settled more than two millennia ago, and have seen continuous habitation since then, the soil has lost its micronutrients and thus made us what we are. Otherwise how is it that whether it is Patna, or Delhi or Meerut, our public institutions are all in an advanced stage of degradation and decay.

As I arrive at the airport, the feeling is almost exactly the same that one gets at any small airport in the country. Vehicles of VIPs and their security entourage appropriating the entire road in front of the terminal. The terminal itself is small and there is much chaos at the check in as well as the security. The toilets, the benchmark of the level of efficiency of the management of any public space, are leaking and dirty. The flight is fortunately on time and as we take off, I once again wonder what has gone wrong with the state of Bihar. Even a decade after independence, it was routinely praised for its exemplary governance. Somehow we lost the plot subsequently. And so now, when there is talk of high speed maglev trains elsewhere in the country, the people of Bihar are still waiting for "4-lane" roads.