

FIRST IMPRESSIONS of GOD's OWN COUNTRY!

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The long immigration queues at the Los Angeles International Airport remind me of the queues at New Delhi Railway Station booking counter at the start of the summer vacation. The first thing that hits me is the amazing number of non-Caucasian people around. The Hispanic janitor, the Asian immigration officer who eyes us suspiciously, the black customs officer who sits bored at his desk, and finally the native American employee of the Dept. of Agriculture. He asks us cursorily if we are bringing in any live animals and then laughs when I point towards my twelve year old son! At least at the airport, it is hard to find a white American, excepting among the passengers.

Off to Westwoods where my brother-in-law lives. The freeways, the lifelines of the country, the asphalt and concrete memorials to freedom and mobility are, like everything else in this country, huge. It is a Saturday, so not too much traffic. Yet, Los Angeles lives up to its reputation as being the city of the automobile. The freeways are six lanes each way and everybody seems to be going somewhere. Another interesting thing one notices is that a majority of the vehicles on the road are not standard cars anymore. They are what are called sports utility vehicles. In fact, almost half the vehicles sold in the US now are utility vehicles like vans and jeeps. A "car" for an American is more than just a means to get from place to place (though this too is essential since there is almost no public transport in most cities, Los Angeles being a prime example) It is, as everywhere else, a symbol of upward mobility. But, it is also an integral part of his personality. The getting of a driver's license together with the first drink in a bar, and buying one's first car are important events in an American's life; this culture's rites of passage. Putting one's stuff in the car and driving off into the sunset to another life still constitutes the American dream!

Westwoods is a rich neighborhood. The houses are well laid and the cars parked are fancy; all Lexus, BMWs, Mercedes, etc. It has always struck me as odd that for a people who so desperately cherish their property and privacy, Americans do not have fencing in their front yards. At least not in the cities, suburbia is a different ball game as they say here. The lack of fencing is more than made up by big signs proclaiming that some ABC security company protects the house. Crime, though down because of the economic upswing, is still a problem - so much so that most cars are now coming with an anti theft system as standard fitting.

I am still jet lagged, not having slept through the twenty hour flight and having eaten 5 breakfasts! One of the problems of flying east since you are always gaining time! Morning is gorgeous. Typical California weather. We go off to the Universal Studios. This is a theme park as they are called here. It has virtual reality shows like 'Terminator 3-D', Jurassic park roller coaster rides and a tram ride through the studio lots where one sees sets used in blockbuster movies like Psycho, Jaws etc. Again, the scale of things is amazing. The escalator called the starwalk here is over seven stories high! My twelve-year-old son is having the time of his life. He is fascinated with the cars and the rides. But he is also perplexed. He finally asks me the question that struck me when I first came here too almost two decades ago. Why do they need so many signs everywhere? On the freeways, in the toilets, in the parking lots, there are instructions or warnings everywhere that one goes.

Phoenix is a city in the middle of the desert. It is almost as hot as Delhi, though air-conditioning is everywhere. It is among the fastest growing city in the country, with a lot of companies moving here because of affordable real estate. There is also a large population of retirees from the cold north. In fact, there is a whole community of farmers from the Canadian prairies. They spend three months in Canada, harvest their wheat and corn and then spend the rest of the year in warm Phoenix; swimming, sunbathing, playing golf, and travelling in their campers.

The rental car is high tech; complete with a satellite navigation system, which makes sure one is never lost! Driving on the right side is tricky, but one manages. At an intersection, while looking the wrong way to see traffic I go and ram into another car. Fortunately, no one is hurt. Tim, the other driver uses his cell-phone to call the police while I call the rental agency. The efficiency of the whole procedure still amazes me. The tobacco-chewing policeman is there in less than 5 minutes, the forms are completed and I get a traffic ticket for violating some rule or the other. The whole thing takes 10 minutes and I drive to the rental car agency, fill in a form and exchange the car for another one! The insurance company takes over from there. The last time I was involved in a minor accident in Karnal, it took me a week to just get the car back from the police!

We take in a walk in a fashionable mall which has all the specialty stores, chic boutiques and ethnic "new-age, fusion" restaurants. We come across a store that has scrumptious looking cakes and pastries on display. It turns out that the store is a bakery for dogs called "The Three Dog Bakery"! Our friend tells us the story of the shop. The owner had three dogs (whose big pictures are displayed in the shop) and was always feeling guilty whenever he had cakes that he was not able to share them with the dogs. So he decided to experiment making desserts for dogs which look just like regular desserts but do not contain stuff like sugar which is harmful for the dogs. The concept was so successful with his friends that he opened up this store which is now a chain in many cities! Pets are big industry here; Americans spend an estimated \$100 billion on their pets annually. That's Rs. 400,000 crores or nearly a quarter of India's GDP! There are now specialist vets and I saw a sign for one brain-tumor specialist for dogs!

Biotechnology companies are actively thinking about using cancer drugs, which have failed clinical trials for safety in humans, for pets. A very controversial television commercial for cats is currently on air. It shows visuals and has sounds that attract cats, without any voice over. In the end, there is a simple message exhorting the cat owner to buy a particular kind of cat food! The idea, as the creator of the commercial explained in an interview is to get the cats to be fascinated by the commercial. Even in as strange a place as America, where everything and anything is 'acceptable', this advertisement has caused many media commentators to scream, "Enough"!