

JAIPUR

The road at Rajive Chowk in Gurgaon is blocked-“*Id hai na sahib, vahan ek masjid hai aur aap ko to pata hi hai yeh musalmaan....*” Was how the person at the workshop informed us about taking another route to reach the Jaipur Highway. But we did manage to get on the highway somehow.

The next 10 kilometers to Manesar are hell- the traffic barely crawls and if this is the 21st century infrastructure which the Haryana government is advertising to attract investment, then it is in for a big disappointment. It took us more than 45 minutes on a purportedly 8 lane expressway to cover 10 kilometers. And this was not even rush hour! Trucks coming the wrong way, cyclists crossing the road and road construction and repair- total chaos. I would love to see a Japanese entrepreneur driving through this mess!

The drive after Manesar is smooth- the road is good and the traffic manageable. We enter Jaipur and ask for directions to the Hotel where we are booked to spend the weekend. As in most other cities, every single person gives us different directions! Interestingly, almost everyone looks into the car and offers to take us there, thereby getting a lift. I finally ask a person wearing a black coat and white trousers, the standard dress of lawyers (since we want to go to a place called Jacob Road in Civil Lines and I assume that a lawyer would know where Civil Lines is). The lawyer is most helpful, and after offering to accompany us, gives some clear directions. On my asking where Jacob Road is, he gets most upset and tells me to reach Civil Lines first and then worry about it!

The Hotel is quite huge- it was a palace of one of the Rajput generals and has a sprawling Mughal garden. The gatekeepers and the valets are, as with all hotels in North India, well built, turbaned, mustachioed and we soon settle into our rooms. The hotel seems to have figured out that the only people who would be able to afford them would be either foreign tourists or NRIs on their annual December migration to India. Everything seems to be set up to cater to them.

There is the mandatory pool, a decrepit gym, a beauty parlour and a jogging track. Interestingly, next to the jogging track are a set of buildings which a board informs me were part of an observatory built by the owners in the 19th century. The observatories used to monitor the soil and air temperature and telegraph these readings to the observatories in Calcutta and Pune.

As the sun sets, the Mughal Gardens bustle with activity. There is a Meena Bazaar with a puppet show and mehndi and all the rest. In one of the pavilions, local Rajasthani musicians and dancers are entertaining the guests who appear sufficiently polite to be appreciative! Or

maybe it is just that they feel that since they are paying so much, they might as well make the most of it.

The next day we decide to “do” the city. I ask the travel desk for directions to the Palace etc and curiously, this person is almost as bad as the people I asked directions on the road! He gives me some vague directions and hands me a map to figure the rest out. Anyway, we somehow manage to maneuver our way to the city but now can't find the parking for the palace etc. As soon as our car turns towards the monuments, a young man runs to the car and offers his services as a guide for Rs. 20/- which I think is a steal. I ask him about the monuments and he says they will only open at 2.30 since it is a Saturday!

We reach the Hawa Mahal, a 5 story façade with many windows which served as a place for the ladies of the palace to watch the proceedings on the main road during festivals. Another guide comes running and we hire him. He claims he will take us to 2 places and even save us Rs. 50/- that we would otherwise have to pay for parking. I am convinced that this is a city of confused people when he tells me that the monuments are open from 9 am!

We hire him and he takes us first to a shop- this is apparently the first of the two places he will take us- this shop is run by a cooperative initiated by the Maharani of Jaipur and sells all kinds of handicrafts and other items. The salesmen are very competent and one can see years of training in conning the tourists. Big boards inform us about “Fixed Price”, though curiously, none of the items have any prices marked on them! Like good tourists, we buy the mandatory Jaipuri quilts and bedcovers etc and depart, some ten thousand rupees poorer.

The guide is waiting for us outside and offers to take us to the palace museum which is next door. Along the way, he shows us a temple which is closed and on reaching the palace museum demands to be paid since he has “shown” us the 2 places he had promised! I am taken aback and ask him which might these be and he very casually mentions, the shop and the locked temple! Clearly, the guide has been cleverer than us and I accept defeat and pay him his 20 rupees.

The palace museum is teeming with people and we take a cursory round of the textile gallery and the workshop with artisans. We go to the Jantar Mantar afterwards but this is a disappointment since it is under repair. It is fairly hot now, though looking at the tourists from Bengal in their monkey caps, one would think otherwise.

We drive back through the main bazaars leading to the Badi Chaupat- the main crossing in the city. The city is a very well planned one and laid out on a grid. The walls of all the buildings and the shops in the old city are colored pink and the shops have identical signages in Hindi. Of

course, as expected, the traffic is very chaotic and multi-modal with that familiar beast called Vikram bellowing out smoke and causing huge traffic jams.

One very interesting thing that I noticed was the presence on the road of many female *mochis!* Many young women were sitting on the roadside, with their anvils and the shoeshine boxes and either polishing or repairing shoes. Now this is something, I have never seen anywhere. If there is one profession, (the other one possibly being that of a butcher) among the so called “menial” professions, that are almost exclusively male, it is that of a cobbler. I am very intrigued by this and would have liked to stop the car and find out more about this from them but there is no place to park the car. I have since then, spoken with many people and no one has yet seen or heard of a female *mochi*. If this is a recent phenomenon, then this clearly ranks as one of the most remarkable events in the process of breaking the gender divide- much more important than women pilots or army officers. This is clearly a phenomenon that needs much more investigation.

Jaipur seems to be a city which is very vibrant. Like most other so-called Tier-2 cities (Ludhiana, Chandigarh, Lucknow, Bhubhneswar etc.) , it is seeing a huge investment boom as corporate and realtors realize that there is a lot of money to be made in these places. The old city seems geared for commerce and tourism, while the new parts of the city radiate a dynamism that comes with malls and steel and glass buildings. Of course, being the seat of power in the state, there are the usual bureaucrats and politicians who, as always are making merry- with the gem trade, the tourist business and now the real estate boom!