

He couldn't have been more than 10-12 years old. Like many others, he too was following us right from the place where the bus had dropped us near the monuments at Fatehpur Sikri. Someone was trying to sell us fridge magnets while another person a set of picture postcards and a third a badly printed book about the monuments. At first I just ignored him till he came and stood right in front of us. "For 5 Rupees, I will recite some *shaiyari* which would make Madam very happy" he said with the confidence of a mature poet at a *mushaira*.

This was at least novel. The harassment and haranguing that one faced right from the time one parked had been quite annoying. As we proceeded towards the monuments, we were stopped by an officious looking man who told us that no private vehicles were allowed and we need to park the car at the parking lot. And just then, three cars with "the party" flags had sped up the road towards the Bulund Darwaza. The grumpy looking man at the entrance to the lot asked for Rs 100/ as parking fees. When I asked him for the rate card, he looked at me with a mixture of exasperation and contempt. Helplessly, I paid up and asked him about how one goes up. He pointed me to a building some distance off and said I need to take a battery bus from there.

As we walked to the bus stop, we were accosted by various shopkeepers who wanted us to "just come and see" what they were hawking. And then a stocky young man with a tag announcing that he is an authorized guide, started walking with us and convinced us to take a guide. Except that after the deal was stuck, he announced that he is busy at the moment and so his "uncle" would accompany us to one set of monuments and he would be joining us at the other monuments. As it turned out, when his "uncle" had shown us around, instead of him, his "brother" appeared to take us around the other set. Mr. Authorized Guide was obviously nowhere to be seen!

The guide also suggested that there are clean bathrooms here and we should relieve ourselves before going up since there are no clean bathrooms around the monuments. The toilet complex is managed by Sulabh and a thin man with ruffian like looks was sitting at a table at the entrance. He asked for Rs 10 to use the urinal. When I lamely suggested that the rate is usually Rs 5 and if he had a rate card somewhere, he seemed a bit annoyed that I was not only questioning his integrity but also his official position as the gatekeeper of urinals. And so once again, I paid up.

And so it went on all through the trip. Everyone who was not wearing a uniform seemed out to hustle anything they could from the tourists. The ones in uniform had other ways of making sure that you get to know that they have the power. Thus, coming back from the Taj, I asked one Taj Suraksha police constable which one of the 5 empty Golf carts I could use to go to the parking lot. He just ignored me and continued mixing his Shikhar with Force 10. On my insistence, he said I could not sit in any of them since all of them were reserved for a VIP visit. Sure enough, soon a convoy of 5 SUVs with party flags and gun totting cops screeched to a halt just outside the Taj East gate. Never mind that the Supreme Court had ruled that no vehicles except battery powered golf carts could come closer than 1 km to the iconic monument.

But no one could accuse the ASI of trying to con the tourists. At the Taj, the Fort and Sikri, the ASI shops had only two guide books- one on Old Goa for some reason and the other on Fatehpur Sikri. And the staff were most reluctant to break their chat session to come and open the glass cases to sell a copy of any of these.

There were literally thousands of people at the Taj, the Fort and also at Sikri. It turned out that the ASI, in a generous gesture, had waived off entry tickets to all its monuments from August 5 to 15 to celebrate 75 years of Independence. At Fatehpur Sikri there were bus loads of pilgrims returning from the annual Urs at Ajmer to visit the Dargah of Salim Chisti. Crowds of rural folks, howling infants, small kids running around and older men sitting and gossiping were all on the floor of the colonnade around the Dargah.

As we made our way back in the sweltering heat to the battery operated bus at Fatehpur Sikri, we were once again accosted by hawkers with mementos. I tried to locate the budding poet but couldn't see him. Just then, a girl, possibly 8-9 years old, came running towards us and said she would recite a couplet for us which would make Madam happy. The adolescent poet obviously was not the only one with aesthetic sensibilities in this place!

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August 9, 2022.