

The squalor has to be seen to be believed- the narrow lane, about 5 feet wide with shops on both sides has a drain running in the middle. The drain empties into an open pit at the end of the lane where there is a small "chowk" or intersection with another lane running perpendicular. The chowk is where the vegetable hawkers have got their carts with seasonal vegetables. The chowk is also the place, the only place where to one side I can park my car.

This is Ramgarh- a small sub-division (or tehseel) headquarters in Alwar District of Rajasthan. The town has an old Jain temple below which they have dug up and found an even older temple. I have come with some people who want to see the dug up temple and the idols which have been found.

Ramgarh is a town of about 20000 inhabitants. The bus stop is on the main highway running through the town and there are small lanes branching off to the sides. Apart from serving as the administrative headquarters of the subdivision, it also is the main market town for the villages around it. This is evident in the market which I walk in- the standard wares of a market serving an agricultural hinterland are evident in the shops. Pesticides, fertilizer, cheap clothes, utensils, clothes, tea stalls, sweets shops, mobile phone repair shops and commission agents. There are of course also a couple of "doctors"- one a qualified BAMS (ayurvedic doctor who obviously practices allopathic medicine) and the one regular feature of all small towns in North India- a "Bengali" doctor who possibly has no qualifications but can "cure" all chronic diseases, notably piles, fissure, sex related diseases and of course that bane of all Asian males- gas!

While others go to the temple, I decide to have tea at a sweetmeat shop. The owner cautions me that he can only serve me in a plastic glass. I ask him to make two cups since my past experience with tea served in plastic cups is that there are barely two sips of tea (something called single in Murshidabad). The saucepan in which tea is going to be made is black with tea stains and dried tea leaves. And so I (and evidently he too) don't notice a fly who has not managed to fly off when water is poured to boil! The tea is prepared with water and milk in equal proportions- Alwar district is well known for its dairy farming, something of which I was to find out more in a few moments. However, the tea has the unfortunate fly swimming in it and so I throw it and ask for another round. The owner refuses to take money for the second round. I ask him about the Mewati population since this is considered to be Mewat region. The shop owner doesn't hide his disdain for the minorities but says, "all castes live here including Mewatis!" Somehow, Mewati muslims have become just another caste in the broad umbrella of Hindu varnaashram !

A gentleman walks into the shop and wants to buy paneer. Obviously, everyone knows everyone else in this town as is obvious from their conversation which hinges on how the "wife" wanted to make mattar-paneer today and so he had been sent out

to buy the paneer. Wanting to be polite I enquire where one gets the peas in this season. The gentleman then goes into a long explanation of how he had gone to Alwar yesterday and instead of buying fruit on the way back bought peas and they were not very expensive etc. etc.

I walk along the market trying to find a chemist shop to buy some Band-Aid. The things available in the shops are of the kind one finds in the weekly bazaars which are organized near most slum clusters in Delhi and other cities- household things, clothes, kitchen stuff etc. Except, these look extremely poor quality and obviously very affordable- excepting umbrellas which somehow look very sturdy and durable. The Chinese have captured the whole market it seems and possibly except the medicines, clothes and the ghevar and milkcake in the sweet shop, almost everything appears to be made in China.

The temple is situated in the market and it is bizarre to walk along an open drain and suddenly turn into a small courtyard with pink marble! This is a rich temple since there are about 60 Jain families in this small town and all of them fairly wealthy. The temple caretaker invites me into the temple to view the dug up idols and starts talking about the miracle. Apparently, or so the story goes, this temple itself is about 500 years old, though it looks more like 50 years since this was made. Once a holy man came to stay in the temple and dreamt that there is a temple below the existing one. Digging was started and lo and behold a temple was found- complete with wall paintings and two small idols. The chamber and the idols are on display though for some mysterious reason the digging stopped after this.

I go back to the car and notice that on one side of the chowk is the Government Veterinary Hospital. A father and son are engaged with a buffalo inside the compound. They are apparently cutting off one of the horns of the poor animal- the horn which has curved and threatens to pierce the skull. Using a hacksaw, the teenaged son is busy sawing off the horn near the end while the father holds on to the buffalo. A disinterested veterinary worker, possibly the compounder of the hospital is sitting in the verandah of this small structure and watching this chore being performed by the teenager uninterestedly while listening to some songs on his mobile phone. A poor farmer then comes in and enquires about when the doctor would be coming. The compounder, annoyed at this interruption, tells him that he doesn't know. The farmer, characteristically diffident as most people are when dealing with the lowliest of government bureaucracy, says that he had come and waited all day yesterday also. At this the compounder gets very angry and tells him that the doctor would not come for another 10 days and he can wait if he wants.

The small town has all the trappings of government- a health center, a tehsel court and a high school, all situated near this chowk. The buildings appear to be in shambles and one can imagine the conditions inside. And yet, the state is never far away- every wall has the usual slogans about sanitation, HIV, family planning and

Sarv Shiksha Abhiyaan painted on them. The high school students “creating nuisance” on the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyaan slogan seems strangely appropriate in these surroundings.

I sit in the car to escape the flies and the mosquitos. Waiting for the others to come back from the temple, I put on the music. And as it turns out, the iPod is cued to Mozart’s Requiem! The bizarre and incongruous juxtaposition reminded me of the scene from Herzog’s Fitzccaraldo where Klaus Kinski listens to the opera while going up the Amazon! The open drains, the filth, the squalor and the sense of time having stopped offered visual cues which seemed to be totally discordant with the audio cues of the first movement of Requiem!