

Prologue: I had been on a trip to Rajasthan from 29/01/05 to 2/02/05. The main aim was to participate in the marriage of my ten-year old friend, Avinash. But the other friend accompanying me, Arvind, managed to convince me to extend the proposed whirlwind tour into a Rajasthan tourism opportunity. I enjoyed the experience thoroughly; I put here some of the peeks in the diary that I wrote just after the trip.

28-Jan-2005

We started the journey in the evening, by taking a 4:30 PM flight to Mumbai. We reached Mumbai by 6:00 PM. The connecting train to Ahmedabad was at 9:00 PM. I wanted to utilize this break for a dinner at a particular salad joint in Bandra, called Just Around The Corner. Officially, I was hosting an unconventional dinner for Arvind, who had never seen/passed through Mumbai. Unofficially, I was longing for seven years to go back to this joint, and eat a true spectrum of salads for mere 120 rupees. We tried to board a local train moving towards Bandra, but Arvind could not muster enough courage to barge into the crowded train along with the luggage. So, we took an auto-rickshaw. The rickshaw had to dodge the evening traffic. We reached the shop at 7:20 PM. I took no time in filling up my platter with some fifteen odd varieties of salads. The glutton inside me, combined with the time pressure, made me eat like a maniac. Arvind sat next to me, a bit shocked to see how fast did a huge serving of salads disappear. I chatted up with owner and servers, and we started our way ahead. This time, we were able to board a relatively less crowded local train moving towards Mumbai Central.

At 9:00 PM, our train to Ahmedabad had started moving. Our cabin was shared by a big Gujrati family, who missed no time in opening their dinner kit. The family was carrying a royal menu of Indian cuisine that day: as if they are on going on a picnic. I had to vacate my place for some while. I stood at the doorsteps of the moving train. I could see Mumbai landscape pass by me for yet another time. I got reminded of the fact that I am associated to this city for a decade now. Half an hour later, I had come back, and tried to sleep off. As usual, I could catch very less sleep in the moving train.

29-Jan-2005

The train had reached Ahmedabad at 5:30 AM. Our plan was to take a ride in the general(unreserved) compartment of the incoming Aravali Express, which would drop us at our next destination, Abu Road, in about four hours. We purchased the tickets, and waited till 6:00 PM. But when the train arrived, somehow Arvind could not run with the crowd. I had managed to run and hang on to the door of a compartment, so that I can move in at the first opportunity. That didn't happen. By the time Arvind came to the

door, a huge crowd had rushed in. There was no chance of a place. Dismayed, both of us ran to the rear compartment. But alas, we were late here also. We had to drop the idea now. So we decided to take a private bus to Abu Road.

We got a bad experience while using a private bus service in Gujrat. The bus went around the city to pick up travelers. Then, we were shifted to a new bus. Here, the seat numbers allocated to us were nullified by the conductor. We were forced to sit on the seat over the rear wheels. We finally left Ahmedabad at 9:00 AM. Arvind managed to catch some sleep. I tried to cool off by looking at the passing-by rural landscape. It was my first travel to Gujrat(and Rajasthan). I learnt that the cows here are very well-built, and have distinct big flat curled horns. I could also see three different crops standing in the fields. My impression now is that (northern) Gujrat is agriculturally rich land. Once we entered Rajasthan, things changed. The bus had to move up and down in the Aravali ranges, and hence the speed slowed down a lot. I did see camels, the camel-mounted natives, with those distinct styles of moustache and turban. Cactus became a common shrub visible. Some nomadic tribes were moving in a caravan as well.

At 2:00 PM, we had reached Abu Road station. We were four hours late according to our original plan. We decided to finish off Mt. Abu in four hours. It takes an hour each for the ascend and the descend to the hill-top town. It was biting cold at the top. We checked in at a cheap motel at the top, had a bath somehow, and managed to eat some light evening food. We had no time for a deserving sumptuous meal. Then we visited the Dilwara temples. I could understand some amount of Jainism there, which to me appeared very close to Hinduism. We also went to Nakhi lake, which is quite polluted and dirty. I did take some photographs of the beautiful landscape, though.

At 8:30 PM, we boarded a really crowded old bus to Udaipur. We somehow managed to con the conductor and get seats to sit. But we could hardly move any limb because of the congestion. Almost till mid-night, we had to travel that way, in the jostling bus, after which it became ok.

30-Jan-2005

Our bus reached Udaipur at 5:00 AM sharp. Both of us were tired due to two continuous night-outs. So we checked in at the first hotel visible close-by. We then slept for two hours.

At 8:30 AM, we had become ready for another day of roaming. We took breakfast of 'Poha': a north-indian delicious snack tailor-made for breakfast purposes. We first went to Jagdish temple. We attended the prayers. I found the ornamentation of walls was quite extricated and skilful; in fact, it was right up there next to what I had seen in Halebedu. We then went to the Raj Bhawan. It is the palace of Ranas, and has been turned into a museum. I took almost four hours to absorb information about Ranas and their valour. I feel now that it was a big learning opportunity for me, given my keen interest in Indian

history in general. For, I remember looking forward for the trip next day, to another fort of the Mewar(Rana) dynasty.

After finish Raj Bhavan visit, we went to a hotel for a basic Rajasthani meal of “daal-baati-choorma”. Yet again, the choice of menu was influenced by my limited knowledge of the region. We had hot served food, which was very delicious. Then I realized that after a day-and-a-half, this was our first full meal!

After lunch, we came back to bus station and enquired about a possible trip to Kumbhalgarh, the next day. Kumbhalgarh is a beautiful small city, of historic importance. But since we had to also reach Ajmer by next day evening, it turned out to be not feasible. Dejected, we had to change our plans to visit Chittorgarh instead. Chittorgarh falls midway between on the way from Udaipur to Ajmer.

We had enough time to kill still. So we first went to Queen’s garden, Saheliyon ki Bagiya. The spring bloom had not set in, though some roses, dahlias, calendulas, chrysanthemums, poppy etc. were having late winter bloom. From there, we walked our way to Moti Magri. I went to the top of the hill(garden), while Arvind, tired by now, chose to stay back at the base. While coming back, we decided to take a horse-cart(Tonga). The tonga-owner was a really jovial old local guy. He not only took us around on the leisurely trip back, but also provided a lot of information about the Rajasthani culture, city culture etc. He dropped us at a cottage industry shop. I purchased a kurta and a new “Banana silk” “sandal-scented” saree for my mother.

By 6:00 PM, we came back to room, and slept for one more hour. In late evening, we had started moving towards “Bhogode ki haveli”. In this place, Rajasthani folk dances are performed in evening, which is accompanied by live folk music in local language. I found it very stirring, and the attendants were generously donating gifts to the artists after each performance. I clicked many a photos. After the event, we roamed around the town in hunt of good food. Finally, we reached a Gujrati hotel, and made a huge kill of food. We came back by 10:00 PM, and slept off.

Gauging by the amount of foreign tourists, I reckon now that Rajasthan/Udaipur is near the top in India, in terms of tourism attraction. Foreigners were moving around the town as commonly as the natives. There were a lot of agents also, who knew French language well. Good business, I guess.

31-Jan-2005

We woke up early morning 5:00 AM. Though still not complete, the sleep was enough for us to move again. We checked out from the hotel and caught 6:30 AM bus to Chittorgarh. Arvind slept off again. I was sitting awake, though, enjoying the countryside sunrise on a chilly morning. The roads were smooth, and a jolt-less ride at top speed really added to my thrill. Midway, we had our delicious ‘Poha’ breakfast again. We

reached Chittorgarh by 9:00 AM.

The main old Chittorgarh city is a 13-km long stretch of a vast fort. We had to hire a guide this time. We also hired a unique auto-rickshaw, which is open from back, like a crocodile's gaping mouth. I learnt that this was the place, where the Mewar(Rana) dynasty was found. We had to cross seven big gates to enter the city-cum-fort. The guide was a learnt person, and told tens of stories of the dynasty, spread over the many centuries they ruled Mewar.

The temple of legendary lady Meerabai, who was of the same dynasty, was in the beginning itself. First Arvind went, and did the 'darshan'. When I went in that old temple, I saw an old person sitting alone in corner and singing Meerabai's poetic creations over a harmonium. I just don't know what prompted me to join in. I remember that it is more than a decade, since I read Meerabai's literature. Anyway, I joined in and for next fifteen minutes, I sang in chorus with the old person, in the totally empty dingy hall of the temple.

We went to a lot of places in the vast fort, which included "kirti stambh"(we climbed up this tower), padmini mahal, gomukh teertha etc. I also came to know the real story behind a common proverb in Hindi, "garhulia luhaar", which turned out to be historical. This trip ended by the early noon.

We took another big lunch of "daal-baati-choorma", leisurely. We then caught 1:30 PM bus to Ajmer, and moved on.

Yet again, on the highway, the journey was extremely comfortable. This time I was much more in the middle of Rajasthan, that too traveling by high daytime. I repeatedly came across horse-mounted people traveling on the road. Most of these people had flowing hairs, a mustache, earrings and turban like an ancient warrior. I also saw many portable shops of ironsmiths by the roadside, which were engaged in preparing and selling various kinds of swords! I felt then, as if time has rewound itself by few centuries or so!

We reached Ajmer by 5:30 PM. Ajmer is 20 kms inside from the national highway, on which we had been traveling. It is a picturesque city, surrounded by Aravali hillocks and a lake in middle. We went straight to the place, where engagement ceremony was had started off. After the ceremony, a "mahila-sangeet" event had been organized. It turned out to be a song-and-dance extravaganza. I am amazed to learn from what I saw then, as the patronization to singing, dancing etc. arts that the business community of Rajasthan does. The business community, in my opinion, defines one extreme of what Rajasthan's culture comprises of: happy-go-lucky, vivacious, artistic people.

I had a meal out of the evening snacks served at the occasion, which was good stuff. Late night, we came back to the adjoining hotel, and slept off.

1-Feb-2005

I woke up at 6:30 PM next day. I was expecting an old common friend, Kapil, to arrive from Mumbai. He finally landed up himself at 8:30 AM. We both chatted for an hour; it was long time since we had met. We moved towards the breakfast corner then, having decided to go on roaming in Ajmer city and a neighboring town, Pushkar, next. After the long “Haldi” ceremony for Avinash kicked off, three of us started off. We first went to the tomb of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti. I found it to be a really secular place, though located in a shoddy locality. A watchman kept on shouting at us to be beware of pick-pockets. Also, I found the priests to be too greedy.

We then moved to “Adhai din ka jhopra”. It is a hall-like monument. The hall is authoritative, with big walls and high carved roofs, which according to the legend, was erected in mere two-and-half days. While returning, we purchased rose perfume by milliliter measurement: I was told that a lot of rose cultivation happens around Ajmer. We took a bus, and pushed off to Pushkar town.

Pushkar town is a holy city, and again equally crowded by natives and foreigners. The oddest fact I found about this town was that hardly any human transport vehicles ply in this city. One has to travel quite a lot on foot. Because people tire out often, one can find most of the shops full with them, trying to utilize their break. To the extent that one would see an odd painter happily painting on his canvas right on side of the street! There was so much laziness in the air that all three of us got engulfed. It was as if we are in a whole new world, where leisure and time-pass is the primary occupation. Painfully, taking break-after-break, we visited the important places such as the Pushkar tank and the Brahma temple. Nearly after three hours, we were back on our way to Ajmer. As if out of laziness, we even skipped our lunch.

Evening we got ready for the wedding. On request by Avinash’s father, I donned a saffron turban. The mare, on which Avinash was perched, was not just well-built, but also beautiful. Kapil and I danced along with the marriage procession. It was my first experience of impromptu dance in company of beautiful girls. Alas! It did not come out well.

The marriage ceremony was long and elaborate, and went on throughout the night. I kept awake once again, and presume to have learnt few nuances of an Indian marriage. A minor shock happened when I ran into a distant relative of groom, who started making lewd comments and passes openly near the bride-side camp, after befriending me. Perhaps I should have explicitly told him “No, thanks for your company”, instead of tolerating him.

2-Feb-2005

I kicked Arvind out of bed at 6:30 AM. It was really cold anyway, and whole lot of

people, tired out of the long ceremony, had slept off. We packed up fast, and caught our train back to Ahmedabad at 7:20 AM.

We reached Ahmedabad at 5:00 PM. We tried to roam around the city. But for lack of information and really high pollution level in the city, we grew bored. We took some vague dinner, and returned to catch our next train.

The next train left for Mumbai at 9:00 PM. We reached Mumbai by 6:00 PM. Our flight was delayed by an hour, so we had to spend an hour at the airport watching TV. By 12:00 PM, we were back in Bangalore.

It was a long, really hectic tour. I was happy that I could really make through it.