

Chapatis and Change

by Sean Talbot

The traveler sees what he sees; the tourist sees what he came to see.

—G.K. Chesterton

Days float through Udaipur, Rajasthan, like beggars indifferent to distinction. The warm January sun shimmers on Lake Pichola, reflects the region's august history in its murky water. There are three clouds in the sky, more than in the week since I arrived.

Across the street from Café Edelweiss, where I am eating dessert before breakfast, a blind local man stands on a speed bump, white cane in hand. Dark skin and cataracts, thick mustache, carefully combed hair. A rusty sign hangs from his neck. A message in Hindi is painted in beautiful script. What I presume to be the same message in English is written in a sloppy hand, blue text on white:

My Eyes Opration.

Please Help Me.

He holds a receipt book in his left hand, a written record of those who have not ignored him. It is open to the first page. He wears a five o' clock shadow, and leather cross-trainers, dirt-ridden and worn like the oily hands of the motorcycle mechanic who works in the open air nearby.

*Does the blind man know that the gold chain fitted to his neck shimmers in the sunlight?
Can he hear my steady eyes upon his, or sense the traces of my guilt for staring into a
face of India which cannot, for once, stare back?*

In my ears, these are raucous, electric thoughts; my heart beats amplified in my ears like the temple bells ringing in a nearby alley.

We both turn our heads toward the clangor.

A group of boys line up outside the cafe, on the street side of a chainlink boundary; one, then three, then seven of them, holding hammered iron bowls, like lidless kettles. Inside them, small, sculpted men sit upon beasts soaked in black oil, covered in marigold petals.

For weeks, I've wondered what gulf exists that would keep the "open-hearted" traveler in me from connecting with, or relating to, the locals, a land that defies and contradicts every adjective I've used in attempt to capture it.

"*Kana*," a boy says, over and over again. "*Pani*."

He can't yet be nine years old. He looks me hard in the eye, points to his mouth, then to my plate, and back to his chapped lips.

Food, water.

Every guidebook, hotelier, rickshaw driver, and doctor I've met since arriving in India has given me the same advice: *do not give to the beggars; they come into the cities because there's more money in tourists than in farming. Giving does them no good.*

"Chapatis, sir, chapatis," says a barefoot boy wearing soot-covered clothes. The boys stand one meter away from my table, behind a chain hung like a velvet rope in a cinema queue line. There are no chapatis on the silver screen of Café Edelweiss; only white people and pastries and dark chocolate. My table is on the front lines: fellow tourists talk and eat behind me, seated strategically deep in the cavernous, piss-yellow dining room.

I want to show my compassion. I want to let the boys know that I see and hear them, that change is possible. But that's just what they're looking for, my doctor friend had said.

The boy adorns puppy eyes and whimpers. I want him to leave. I cannot even use the Hindi phrase I learned in Varanasi for banishing touts—*nahi chaiye, I do not want*. These children offer me nothing, want only my food.

"Hello, sir, chapatis." A hoarse, intimate whisper from the old beggar this barefoot pre-teen will someday become: "Please."

Two nights ago, I saw him squatting in the street, near a fire of burning garbage. His companions were huddled in tight circles: understanding, community, friendship. Things I cannot—do not—offer him.

Instead, I ignore him, all of them, and their pleas for *kana; hello, please, sir, chapatis*.

Sir, please. Hello?

I cannot—will not—eat in front of them, nor can justify teasing them with the two sandwiches on my table, both heaping with eggs and bacon. I pretend the sandwiches are not there. I write instead, holding my tears back because maybe they'll think I'll break, and then they'll have full stomachs for the day, and return tomorrow, psychologically and digestively reinforced, expectant.

My downward glare renders me into another deaf tourist. The tourists at the tables behind me talk louder as the boys hold up the bowls and ask, in the same melancholic whine, *kana, pani, please sir, ma'am, chapati*.

Silence from the nosebleeds. The boys leave.

I am an awful, selfish voyeur. Another white invader whose economic contributions profit hotels that shun locals as a cultural norm. A Bikaner hotelier said to me, *any unmarried Indian couple cannot, by Indian law, stay in a tourist hotel.*

If, by chance, a foreigner befriends a local, the latter is typically not allowed in the foreigner's hotel. In the case of my friend Rita, a British woman who invited an Indian restaurateur to dinner at our hotel, the owners enthusiastically said the local, who worked at the hotel across the bridge, was "a good Indian man, and is welcome here!"

For most of us tourists, however, they fear rape, or robbery, or some other sin for which we do not have a word.

After twenty eternal minutes, the rest of the boy beggars move on, unfazed by rejection, determined as when they arrived. Will the customers at the next café feed them, or the one after that?

There are programs to help the poor, the guidebooks say. If you want to help them, donate to the following causes.

The guidebooks say nothing, however, of the heartache in seeing a man, like the one sitting under a tree in Pokhara, Nepal lifting his amputated, gangrene femur in the air with one hand, and a rusty tin can in the other, marked simply, \$.

That gulf between us seems wider than the Pacific Ocean. Airplanes and cargo ships could not bring me closer to the little boy standing three feet away, who has returned to the café's chain barrier. Perhaps he saw something in me and came back to retrieve it.

Who am I, exactly, that I would refuse a child food at the word of a rich doctor or a guidebook written by a western author, which both say it would do the child 'no good'? How can one who has not known true hunger say such a thing? If my friend Kokayi, an

American activist whose mission is to end child hunger in the United States, saw me now, he would dash our friendship to the dogs.

Who am I to deny a request for a photo, as I have, from an Indian family on holiday, or a few rupees to a local woman in the park? Is it because I wish for a connection based less on transactional experience, or that I would prefer the barter economy of buskers or street artists, a few rupees for a song? What if these children have not had the opportunity to learn an instrument, or how to use their voice, but to beg to survive the day, or a mother's callused hand?

What inalienable right have I, a fellow human, to project expectation or desire upon a culture that asks *so little* of me? To think: I want an experience to have a particular impact on me; I need to see this or that, or need to feel as if my experience is somehow authentic. I loathe the roles this little boy and I have been born into, pointlessly, for we are equally bound to our respective ranks in the caste system.

In many parts of India, tourists and travelers alike—particularly Westerners—are automatically inserted into a predetermined slot of economic import. We are ushered to the front of lines at train stations, hospitals, treated kindly by hoteliers who routinely hit dog- and boy-beggars with sticks.

Oh, that I could offer them *anything!*

Already I deny the boys something so easily given. I could buy each one of them a sandwich, filled with protein and served on fresh-baked bread. I could pay out-of-pocket for the *eye opration* for the blind man.

So why don't I?

Because I've been conditioned to think that it wouldn't change anything. *Lonely Planet* and *Slumdog Millionaire* declare that compassion and guilt are juicy prey for the

Begging Industry; that, regardless of my intention, the money would certainly end up in the hands of kidnapers, rapists, and sleazy businessmen, and that no amount of change would keep these boys from returning to Café Edelweiss tomorrow.

The impossible gulf between local and foreigner widens. If it is not, as they say, what happens to us that matters, but how we react to it that hones our character, I wonder if compassion, in this case, isn't quite enough.

Sean Talbot is a writing coach and Alaska commercial fisherman based in Portland, Oregon. His writing has appeared in *Everywhere All the Time* and *Airplane Reading*. He writes about place, home, and culture in his blog, *Stumptown Lives*.