

Kid's KOrner

India by train: contrasts of people, places

WASHINGTON — From a window of one of India's best trains, a departing passenger looks down on the holy city of Varanasi, a glorious distant sight sparkling in the rays of the rising sun.

The traveler sees the sun-gilded ghats — broad steps on the banks of the Ganges River — and the spires of the city's thousand temples.

The splendid view is deceptive. Nothing that is holy in India is considered dirty, but Varanasi, up close, is one of the filthiest cities in the vast country.

An Indian medical student, on his way to the Ganges for his ritual bath, tells a visitor that he will immerse himself in the water, ignoring the floating corpses of goats, monkeys, and an occasional beggar. "It is a question of mind over matter," he says.

Splendor to Squalor

A railway trip across the Indian subcontinent, from Peshawar, Pakistan, to Chittagong, Bangladesh, is a study in contrasts: from splendor to squalor, from rugged mountains to flooded plains, from steam-powered, narrow-gauge trains to swifter wide-track diesels.

The excellent train out of Varanasi, for example, contrasts with the night train from Agra to the holy city. It is filthy, even in first class. It has no bedding, food, or water. Hot cinders blow in its windows.

The Indian Railways system is vast. It transports 10 million passengers a day over 38,000 miles of track, employs 1.6 million workers, and uses 11,000 locomotives.

The railway is the primary reason the huge, problem-plagued subcontinent manages to operate, Paul Theroux, author of a best-selling book, "The Great Railway

Bazaar," writes in National Geographic.

India, he writes, is one of the world's greatest railway nations, in the number of its trains, stations, and long-distance travelers, and in the economic self-sufficiency of its rolling stock.

Most Roaches and Rats

The rail system excels in negatives as well, with the most cockroaches, the most rats under platforms, the most forms to fill out, and some of the dirtiest sleeping cars.

"In India," Theroux writes, "the railway is not merely a way of going to and from work, but rather a solution to the complex demands of the family's life. Birth, death, marriage, illness, and religious festivals all require witnesses and rituals that imply a journey home."

It's easy to identify long-distance travelers in India. "They are heavily laden and always carry a big steel trunk." Journeying families "sit on it, sleep beside it, use it for a table, and when their train draws in, they hire a skinny man to wrestle it on board."

On one leg of this trip, Theroux sat across from an Indian who was on a two-month home leave from his tedious job abroad. One of the two months, the man said, he spent on trains, riding up and down the country.

Pakistani tempers were frazzled by months of drought when Theroux began his trip near the base of the Khyber Pass. When the train pulled into the station at Peshawar, it was pitch dark and the temperature was 110 degrees. The travelers were craggy-faced Afghan refugees, said to number more than 3 million in Pakistan.

By the time the train reached Lahore, the capital of Punjab, the

weather was cooler, and scattered monsoon showers had begun. At Amritsar, scowls caused by fear of drought changed to smiles as the skies blackened and opened up with the first powerful rain of the monsoon. (Theroux made his trip before violence involving Sikh separatists broke out in Punjab.)

At the eastern edge of India, Theroux writes, "The monsoon that beautifies and enriches the countryside made Calcutta ugly and almost uninhabitable. Rain in India gives all buildings, especially modern ones, a look of senility. The streets were flooded, there were stalled cars everywhere, and people waded among the drowned dogs."

"Toy Train" Trip

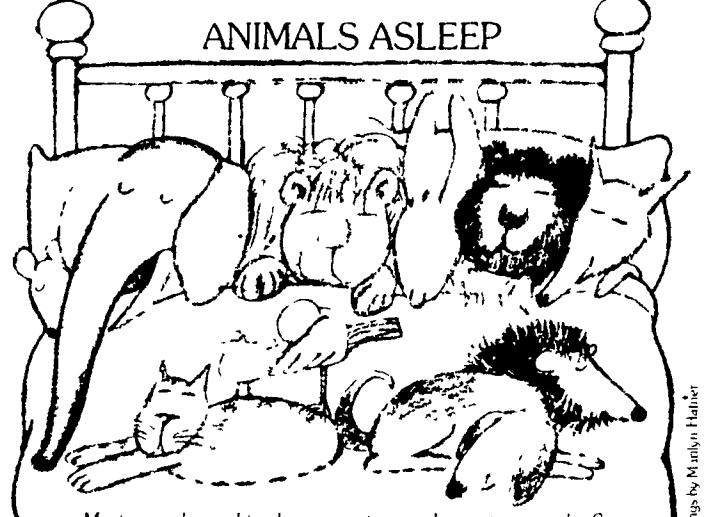
After leaving Calcutta, however, Theroux experienced one of the most scenic segments of his travels on the so-called "toy train" from New Jalpaiguri to Darjeeling.

The narrow-gauge mountain railway, loaded with passengers and joyriders, passes through valleys and hillsides that are "open to the distant plains, and so the traveler on the toy train has a view that seems almost unnatural, it is so dramatic."

The wonder of the ancient train, like the wonder of much else in India, "is that it still operates," Theroux concludes.

"Indian is a complex place. The phones seldom work, the mail is unreliable, the electricity is subject to sudden stoppage. There are numerous natural disasters, and there are 700 million people. It seems almost inconceivable that this country is still viable, and yet there are times when one gets glimpses of its greatness. Near the end of my Indian journey I decided that India runs primarily because of the railway."

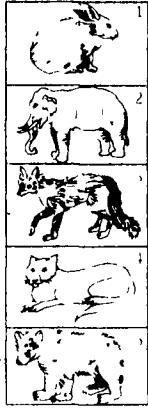
ANIMALS ASLEEP



Drawings by Marilyn Fisher

Most animals need to sleep or rest every day, just as you do. Some animals are long sleepers. They don't have many enemies. They are usually predators that hunt other animals for food. Other animals are short sleepers. They must stay awake to watch out for hungry enemies that would like to make a meal of them.

Below are pictures of five animals and five interesting sleep facts. Draw a line from the animal to the fact that fits it.



- A Usually sleeps in a hole in the ground but may sleep in a tree
- B Crawls into a den and sleeps away most of the winter. But unlike a true hibernator, if something disturbs it or if the weather warms up, it will quickly wake up.
- C Usually sleeps three or four hours at one time. May sleep standing up or lying down.
- D May sleep up to 16 hours a day.
- E Needs to be so alert that it never goes into a deep sleep. It just takes short naps.

COLOR THIS!

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| 1. BLACK | 6. ORANGE |
| 2. LT. GREY | 7. GREEN |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. LT. BROWN |
| 4. BLUE | 9. LT. BLUE |
| 5. BROWN | 10. LT. GREEN |

BLOODROOT: THESE DAINTY WHITE FLOWERS DON'T DESERVE SUCH A BLUNT NAME. THE ROOT OF THIS FLOWER PRODUCES A RED-ORANGE DYE WHICH THE AMERICAN INDIANS USED FOR WAR PAINT AND PIONEER CHILDREN USED IT TO COLOR EASTER EGGS. THIS FLOWER HERALDS THE APPROACH OF SPRING.



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