

# There Are Other Rivers

On Foot across India

*"For I have discovered that there are other rivers. And this my boys will not know for a long time nor can they be told. A great many never come to know that there are other rivers." - John Steinbeck*

Alastair Humphreys

# Dawn

*"It was a morning like other mornings and yet perfect among mornings."*

I walk quietly past the night watchman, bundled in blankets and snoring on the floor. I step out of the lodge. I'm out into the world. I have begun. Dawn will come quickly. But not yet. My pack feels comfortable. It's as small as I could manage, but we can't travel without baggage. We carry it wherever we go, even when we're trying to leave it all behind.

I glance up at the dark sky. I find Venus and use the bright star to check my bearings. I turn my back on it and begin walking west. I now know which direction I am going. That is virtually all I know about today.

One of the few certainties is the blazing heat and the noisiest country on Earth. So I breathe in the cool air and savour the silence while it lasts. Dawn smells different far from home. The air is full of possibilities. That's rubbish, of course. Air is air. Nothing more. But I'm excited to be on my way and am sniffing possibility all around me.

My legs are strong. My feet are comfortable. I have a sense of purpose. I'm here to learn and think and experience. And also to walk well and cover distance. To test myself. I feel good. I love it out here. The day has not yet knocked that out of me.

The street sweepers are already working. Bent double with one arm behind their backs, they sweep the street with short broomsticks made of twigs. They sweep, sweep, sweep at the dust, coconut husks, scraps of newspapers, cigarette ends and plastic bags. Sweeping India clean. Oxymoron, impossibility. Sweep, sweep, sweep. Sisyphus meets Escher. Sweep, sweep, sweep. Repeat day after day. Year after year.

With rhythmical arcs they sweep yesterday's unwanted remains into small piles. Perhaps an ox cart will collect them. Perhaps they will be rifled through by the stray dogs with sores and lame legs. Or perhaps their human rivals will beat them to it: India's unloved, nameless and destitute (who each, of course, have names and were, once at least, loved). They lie in doorways, their *lungis* (sarongs) wrapped tightly round their frail bodies like

shrouds. They sleep the sweet hours of blessed escape when, if their dreams are kind, their lives are limited only by their imaginations. I wish them long sleeps. Is this the only kindness I can offer? Is this the best I can do?

I continue down the dark street. At dawn towns are quieter than villages. There are no cockerels, no bleating goats being led to pasture. I pass a small temple. The gate is still shut. On the outside wall is a small deity in a niche. A candle flame casts a tiny glow over the god. The wall above the statue is black with years of smoke. Rippling downwards is a red waterfall of solidified candle wax.

Dawn never arrives gradually. It comes in little leaps each time I notice that it has grown lighter since I last paid attention. The sky is greying. I can see further. I am past the shops and bus stand. There are homes beside the road now. Most are still dark but a few are beginning to stir. Through an open door I see smoky orange flames wrapping up around a cooking pot. A fat woman in a green sari stands sleepily in the doorway. She doesn't notice me.

The ground outside another home has already been swept and splashed with cow dung and water to keep the dust down. The fronts of India's rural homes are always pristine, even if just yards away a stinking pile of rubbish has been dumped. An elderly woman is marking out her *kolam* for the day. These elaborate, symmetrical patterns of white rice flour are redrawn each morning. They welcome guests to the home as well as Lakshmi, the beautiful four-armed goddess of prosperity. The old woman, bent double and concentrating on her *kolam*, does not notice either as I pad past. She pours white flour from her dark fingers in a thin, neat line, like sand rushing through an egg timer. Thousands of days have begun like this for her. I wonder how many remain. Ahead of me a circle of light illuminates a cluster of men at a small tea stand. Two are sitting on a homemade bench. They are discussing the morning's newspaper, a broadsheet of few pages, inky photographs and swirling Indian script. The other men are standing, quietly sipping steaming glasses of milky tea. They hold them delicately at the rim as the glass is too hot to hold. Moths swirl round the bright bulb that hangs above the busy proprietor.

In a reminder to myself that this journey is about more than merely pushing through miles and pain, I stop. I enter the pool of light. I unclip my rucksack, roll it from my back and dump it on the floor. All eyes are on me. I stoop under the low thatched roof and sit on the end of the wooden bench. I look around, smile and blow out dramatically, suggesting that I am tired. It's not true: I've only walked a few miles. It's just a role I play. The road has taught me that this is an approach that works. It starts a conversation.

"Chai?" someone asks.

"Chai," I agree.

It's time for a cup of tea.

## Flabbiness

"You know how advice is: you only want it if it agrees with what you wanted to do anyways."

There are three stages of flabbiness in life. Each is more restricting and stifling than the one before. They creep insidiously over me like vines until it takes one hell of a struggle to escape their clutches. If ever I feel the saggy symptoms snuffling up on my life then I know it is time to hit the road.

The first stage of flabbiness, and the easiest to fix, is physical flabbiness. It begins when busy schedules, dark winter days and eating too much win the devil's footrace against the part of me that knows that exercise isn't a waste of time but actually makes me more efficient, alert and happy. Despite knowing this I am still at times sufficiently idle to let my standards slip and my fitness slide away. Fitness is like chasing a shoal of fish: difficult to master and get on top of, easy to lose.

If I don't go running for a few days, I feel cooped up and ratty. Leave it a few more and the habit is broken. I know I need to run. I want to run. But I just can't be bothered. Flabbiness has begun to set in, slowly, invasively, like cataracts. Before I know it I am easing out my belt buckle and blaming my sloth on the effects of age.

The second stage is mental flabbiness. Give up exercising, stop forcing myself out the front door for a run and inevitably my mind starts to sag too. I used to feel alert and inquisitive. I read lots of books. But one evening I came home tired. Flopping down onto the sofa I reached for the television remote instead. Suddenly I am gripped by light entertainment. I realise how pleasant life can be if I stop thinking about it. It is much simpler to exist than to live. I've got a dishwasher and a coffee percolator and I drink at home most nights with the TV on. I sit slumped in front of the telly flicking round the channels until I have frittered away enough of my life that it's time to go to bed. Finally, if I start forgetting any of these things, then I know I am on a slippery slope towards the third, terminal, stage of flabbiness: moral flabbiness!

- Each day I am one day closer to my death. No matter how aware I am of this, it is still sometimes difficult to believe in my own death.
- I don't know when I will die, so putting things off to an indeterminate date in an un-guaranteed future is pretty daft.
- I am happiest when I have a sense of purpose.
- There are so many places I would still like to see, so many interesting people to meet, so much to do. And there is so little time. Before I know it I'll be dead and what a bloody waste that will be if I've just been arsing around.

By the time I have succumbed to the debilitating onslaught of physical and mental flabbiness I am already well on the primrose path to moral flabbiness. Not only have I conceded my physical health and settled for candyfloss in place of a brain, I have accepted that this is good enough for my life. I have become comfortably numb. I have decided that *Friends* repeats and a Chinese takeaway are sufficient return for the privilege of being born, healthy and intelligent enough, in one of the richest, most free countries on the planet. I have a passport to explore the world. I will always be able to find some sort of work. I will never starve to death. It's hard really for me to come up with any decent excuses. The choice is all mine.

Life is too brief and too rich to tiptoe through half-heartedly, rather than galloping at it with whooping excitement and ambition. And so I explode in rage just in time. It's time to go

prowling in the wilderness. It is time to live violently again. It is time to sort my life out. This can be done in two ways. I either jump in the nearest cold river for a bracing swim, or I plan a trip, set a start date and, come what may, begin.

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