



**János Háy**

## Indian time and my father

"If you always want to end up the winner, if you don't know that being in India already means that you're a winner, you lose." Hungarian novelist János Háy on the new global "playing field" and the "authenticity of penury".

If you can't stand others encroaching on your space, breaking through the wall that you're used to having between you and them, you lose. If you can't stand others touching you, handling you, laying their hands on your shoulders, so that when they retreat, there is nothing but smoke and noise that comes between you, you lose. You're standing on Chandni Chawk, the market of old Delhi, a loser, the sounds assault your brain, and as the muezzin chants, you can't even remember where you're headed. It's coming from a loudspeaker. Apparently, the old-style religion does not frown upon this new-style technical assistance. You see the demarcation line between the Hindu and the Muslim Delhi as the sound breaks through it from time to time. Of course, terrorists also want to violate borders now and then, so the public buildings are protected by soldiers equipped with machine guns crouching behind sandbags, watching over what, as the Mumbai attacks prove, appears to be public safety. You are suddenly scared, anything can happen anywhere, but if you're scared, you lose. And then on to the largest market of seasonings in the world, where everyone is coughing and spitting, in the bales vaguely familiar seasonings, the smell so thick it's impossible not to spit and you spit too on the cobblestones on top of the other spit. Nobody hides the phlegm in their handkerchief here. Suck it down from your nose to your mouth and spit it out. You shoo off the rickshaw men and the self-appointed tourist guides. They'll show you everything practically for free, palaces carved from marble hidden in narrow alleyways, here and there the water pipes break through the medieval walls, tangled electric cables run in disorder above your head, the two-twenty volts might crash down on you at any time, men in dim corners are working on machines that remind you of the time of the Industrial Revolution, the museum industry in action, further off they're smelting gold in small crucibles in a thousand year old stone furnace, the guide who has attached himself to you in the meanwhile takes you inside various shops to buy something, he's working on commission, but you say, No. If you can't say No or can't accept the consequences of saying Yes, that you've joined a chaotic system where you're passed from hand to hand in an attempt to get you to part with your money, you lose. If you always want to end up the winner, if you don't know that being in India already means that you're a winner, you lose. If your parents protected you from everything, if there's no bacteria inside you, if they sterilized the toilet and washed you with anti-bacterial soap, you lose. The first time you go into a fast-food place whose kitchen is out on the street, its ovens made of packed mud, while inside at the tables the locals sit using only their right hand

to eat, they use the left for something else, if you're interested look it up in your guidebook, the food comes on a tin plate, griddle-cakes and vegetables with spicy sauces, and when you eat this food, the lava erupts from your insides and you run to relieve yourself, the liquid faeces come spurting out of you, or else it waits two more weeks and a worm grown inside your intestines that will take months to kill off, and you lose. If you grew up in a sterile environment, you lose. All those Indians laugh at you and look you in the eye, because they dare to look you in the eye, and if you don't dare to look back, you lose. If you keep your distance they look down on you, they don't consider you anything but a foreign object with money. If you can't look them in the eye, if you can't lean close to them, if you can't see the authenticity in the penury, you lose. You're a tourist, and India is a favourite tourist destination. You will remain a stranger in a strange land.

They rob you, they cheat you, you bargain and haggle from morning to night, what should be how much cheaper, whereas it's already cheap enough as it is. You become part of the world that has humiliated and abased two thirds of the globe. You are one of the rich who do not think about the neo-colonization that the world's arrogant half engages in to this day. You consider leftist ideology a thing of the past, you think that the terror of white supremacy has ended with the liberation of the colonies. You don't take into account that nothing has come to replace the destroyed economic and social traditions except servitude and poverty. You are part of the world that feeds off of the fat of the lean East. Back home, you buy the products they produce at low prices, after all, the eastern labourers, not infrequently children, made them for starvation wages under conditions that would be unthinkable in Europe. Let them learn what we know, you're thinking, let them be as flexible as European culture. It's not our fault we're ahead of them, they shouldn't have stopped progress thousands of years ago. The Asian mode of production failed even back then, except they didn't notice, because Europe hadn't made an appearance among them yet. They should have realized that the only goal worth aiming for is material progress, in other areas, such as spiritual improvement, progress is hopeless anyway.

A new metro, new industrial parks, new shopping centres, if you don't see that India has caught on and is learning, you lose. It is forging ahead like a tank. According to Darwin's theory, they won, provided that we consider the survival of the species a primary goal. Multiply and multiply some more, the Bible says, and they are multiplying. Every sixth person in the world is Indian, whereas only every six-hundredth is Hungarian. We don't even have enough offspring to pay for our pensions. Of course, in Hungary, most of us know about pensions only from hearsay. The migration of people is a slow process, people looking for work come in slow streams from the overpopulated world. Europe's population is changing unnoticed. We're dead set against them bringing their chadors and their cheap labour, their unacceptable morals; they refuse to assimilate, when they're living off of us we're up in arms, whereas it's the other way around, we're the ones that can't live without them. This is no longer the Europe of thirty years ago, Turks speak Turkish-German on the streets of German towns, it's their lingua franca, London's retail trade is in the hands of Indians and Pakistanis. While we are fighting for a shorter workweek and a life more worthy of a human being, longer summer vacations, but time for a bit of winter skiing as well, they are working. Of course, India is not what it was thirty years ago either. Gandhi's non-violent revolution has been replaced by intense financial activity. India's time has come, the posters say. Three countries are on the playing field: China, Russia, India, the rest were disqualified in the semi-finals. In Delhi people say India will win, in Beijing

they're betting on China. Europe and America are regarded only as possible markets and the hated world that is the source of their humiliation. But they're tired and have had their day, they can't be counted on in the future, though it's hard to tell at this point in time what would happen to the eastern economies without our conspicuous consumption.

The leftist ideologies that have had their day are popping up like weeds. Religion is the opiate of the masses, says the president of Hyderabad University as he sips his whisky, he's just returned from China. No one in Budapest believes that he will ever hear this sentence again. If you laugh when you hear it, you lose, because despite the West's admiration of India, religion there can't be comprehended if approached only from its spiritual dimensions. Religion is an institution that applied spiritual pressure to preserve the caste system, ignorance, and keeps people in poverty. There is no free democracy, democratic principles stand in the service of capital, a man from Kerala says, the Hungarians just changed horses and not their political system, and he is gung-ho for socialism. He brings up the state as an example, meaning Kerala, where there is a communist government and they have in fact eradicated illiteracy, thanks to positive discrimination they were able to move those from the lower castes to the elite proportionately, and to obliterate all sorts of principles based on prestige and authority. India is an alliance of states with independent governments. From the congressional party conservatives to the out and out commies, the political palette is colourful. The people, too, are colourful, the women wear colourful saris; here, even the intellectuals are not loathe to wear traditional Indian garb; nobody thinks about them what I think about those Hungarians who appear in public in a peasant vest or a Bocskai jacket. The skin colour varies from the very light to the very dark. They say that India is a paradise for racists as well as human anthropologists, because for thousands of years tradition has kept society static and retained the various cultures and blood groups intact.

The people of Kerala talk about solidarity in an English that conforms to the acoustics of the local language (Malayala); they talk about how a member of the elite is bound to care for those who have no say in decision making, those who are in need of someone else's help. My children know about this type of European elite only from books; I have actually met leftists who believed in the improvement of society, and through it, of man; I have seen the last guardians of the flames of enlightenment, whose endeavours were made impossible once and for all by the specifically Hungarian realization of their dreams here at home. In Europe, ideals and those who believed in them have been relegated to the museums. Social thinking is ruled by the "solve it yourself and rule your own life" movement, and if you fail in the process of solving it, it was your fault; no one reflects on the extent to which responsibility and duty are bound to the individual and to what extent they are bound to society. It takes a crisis, the loss of middle class security, for people to realize, on an emotional level at least, that anyone might lose anything, whether it is his fault or not, that no one has the right to anything by virtue of birth — thoughts that force their way into the light of day while the middle class is still worried about next summer's vacation and next winter's skiing trip, the children's language school in England, the risky bank accounts, and not their dinner. Indian intellectuals feel lousy surrounded by so much misery. They feel lousy because they know perfectly well that the leaders of India are also to blame for the misery. I am in Jajpur in the palace of the maharajah, looking at the photographs of one of the last rulers. Polo was his favourite pastime, and in England he was considered one of the best players. He was most proud when he received a visit from the viceroy. There he stood

ceremoniously by his side, his clothing and his palace speaking of fabulous riches, and he didn't care how many were moaning outside the gates. He would have liked to be English, but he could only be Indian. The elite of Europe are as pleased with themselves in their good life and provincialism as the maharajah of Jajpur, and the more insignificant the country we visit (for instance, our own, which — need we add — is still close to our hearts), the more we show off with what we've got and the more glaring the provincialism. We fix our eyes on New York or Washington, we applaud the war in Iraq, cry our approval if that's what is called for, and our disapproval if that's what is expected of us, and we forget to so much as glance toward the Third World to see the conditions there, along with the conditions on the outskirts of our own towns, the villages of the dying regions, or what has happened to the Roma in the last twenty years, that the greater part of the Roma foundation funds never crossed the city limits of the capital, and then we're indignant if those for whom it was meant come to claim it. We can live quite comfortably while half of the country barely makes do on the poverty line, and get a lump in our throats only if our accumulated wealth is threatened. As long as the ghettos and slums keep the dregs of society confined, we don't feel responsible, our feeling of comfort remains intact. If they're there, it's their fault. And nobody cares that there should be mobility in the country, whereas the feeling of getting ahead is capable of releasing incredible energies in every stratum of society. Also, the introduction of the new energies into the elite would be as necessary as a piece of bread. We're not fazed by the newly emerging caste system, whose walls were first put up out of money, though by now schooling too is part of the mortar. We're surprised only if all hell breaks loose among the strata deprived of opportunity, and without thinking, driven by emotion, they rally behind the proponents of shameful and intolerable principles.

I'm the guest of a middle class family. They're a bit surprised when it turns out that I like the local flavours, whereas they'd have preferred to serve me a French-style dinner. They employ armies of servants. India is teeming with servants. There is a saying in Jolly Old England: it's worth living here because Indians make the best servants. Even poets and teachers have servants. Human labour is so cheap anyone can afford to hire help. The middle class is the same everywhere. Provided you have enough money, you can pay for the same services all over the world. This family is just like a family back home living in the Buda hills. They radiate the comforting feeling of security. They are good people, but they're just like the people I know throughout the world. It is always the poor who are interesting, because they are forced most keenly to live according to local conditions. The good life standardizes people, it turns them into a dime a dozen. They're different only in comparison to the poor; in comparison to the world, they are alike. And yet there is a difference after all: even these wealthy people are open and above board. Indian culture is not reflective, like ours. Jokes and humour are present, but irony and cynicism are unknown. People call things by their names. Communication is guided by honest and direct talk about the world. There is no time for pretence and guile. Joy is joy and pain is pain, and ten rupees are ten rupees. Life is experienced directly. It is the curse of European culture that it has made the immediate experience of life impossible. We've cut ourselves off from the origin of things; every product is an abstraction. We don't know how it was made or of what ingredients. We have chosen comfort over the elemental level of the understanding of the world. The basis of the world is like a simple lever, a clearly defined system of causes and results, whether we're on the terrain of physics or of biology. In India if you don't know the simple structures of everyday life, you die of starvation, you're dead, and in a non-reflective culture, a dead man is just a lifeless corpse that's of no use for anything.

I am heading to Benares (Varanasi), one of the most famous spiritual centres of the world, sharing a compartment with a Belgian–French religious historian and two American girls. The religious historian tells us that he is engaged in studying a special reincarnation of Shiva. He's on a twelve–month research trip in order to discover something, I can't quite follow what; he tells us about those old Hindu books that talk about this strange god known only in certain areas, for instance here in Benares. The American girls are lively, they buy tea, they eat dinner, they're extremely happy that compared to their limited finances life here is so cheap, and that they decided to embark on this long trip. True, sometimes the Indians touch them, their hair, for instance, because they're blond, and they even touch them in more intimate places, but they never go further than that, they don't have to be afraid of sexual harassment; besides, the Indians are still living in pre–sexual revolution times. The girls sip their tea, an Indian type boiled with buffalo milk, sugar, and spices, and which, despite the English domination, is called chai and not tea, and they're deliberating whether they should go to Nepal, which is even cheaper and where the people are even nicer than the Indians, because they're so poor, they have no reason to be bad. In a hundred years from now, one wonders, who will be the cheerful girls and who the Belgian religious historian, who will make up the happier half of mankind? Will the exotic tours head from West to East, or from East to West? No one knows what the poverty and dominance map of the world will look like then.

I get off the train. Narrow streets, cows, dogs, monks, dung, the early Middle Ages. In the hotel I realize they've stolen my money, a quickly won material experience in the centre of spirituality. They try to palm hashish off on you wherever you go, cheap, and of the best quality, needless to say. In their eyes the white men are idiots, they come to gape over a religion they haven't the vaguest idea about, they've heard of only a handful of the nearly three thousand gods, and even get that handful mixed up. They come to put on Indian garments, to meditate on the banks of the Ganges, and to get a cheap fix of coke. A couple of ageing European faces among the mendicant monks, they came with the first flood in the late sixties, they were hippies back home, or just got tired of the good life of the middle classes and went in search of spiritual deliverance, which brought them here; and they stayed, possibly because the paternal inheritance sufficed to finance life only in India, possibly because something really touched them deep down: Vishnu, Prince Krishna, Ganesh with the elephant's head, or the cocaine.

Debris wherever you look. A country whose relationship to garbage goes back to the Middle Ages, when there was no garbage, when materials were organic and became part of the environment once again; a fast food restaurant in Tamil Nadu, they still dish your lunch out on a banana leaf, in the tea shop they serve you tea in half–baked pottery, you throw it away, it breaks and decomposes, is returned to the soil. This is the country that has become a garbage heap of plastic, whose half–life will survive civilization itself. They don't know what they should do about it, they haven't accumulated garbage before. In the most breathtaking places like the Himalayan waterfall it takes a sleight–of–hand to take a picture that doesn't include the plastic bags hanging from the branches or the plastic bottles that mar the landscape.

I am sitting on the hotel's terrace and the sun is just going down. I can hardly believe that I have reached my destination for the day, and that even the setting sun is adding to the experience. You never know what bus you should take and whether it will take you where you want to go; it may very well let you off at another station from where you must proceed on a motorized tricycle. Or it

may not take you anywhere, because it would take a miracle for it to start up at all. And yet India seems to be functioning, and if you pay attention, you can actually feel it. This is the highest point one can reach in India, nearly three thousand meters. I wanted quiet, the cities, whether Benares or Rishikesh, wore me out; though there were churches on every corner and armies of priests, yogis and monks, they could not make up for the silence which in the long run is the only route to meditation.

I am sitting on the terrace, I even got hold of some whiskey to help me turn inward. What a great thing it is, I thought, to believe in a society, and my father came to mind, who had a positive worldview, for whom human history was progressing toward something, and for whom that something was good. And also that the community will punish those who would harm it, and that the leading elite, to whom he also belonged on the village level by virtue of being the director of a large cooperative, should be busy twenty four hours a day thinking up ways of improving the lives of those who don't have the answers, and who cannot act on their own. Though he hadn't read either, Marx and Toynbee made fortuitous companions in my father's head. He only read books on gardening, but for him *Modern Blackcurrant Cultivation* was enough, it seems, to have the proper attitude toward the community he lived in. I felt ashamed knowing that we are light years away from this sense of responsibility, I felt ashamed of our ignorance of the world, of our place in the world, and our insignificance. Ashamed of how blind we are to the basic questions. Ashamed that though the world is open toward us, we turn away and twiddle our civilized thumbs behind closed doors, mostly with a sense of superiority, inordinately pleased with our good lives. And we don't even notice that we have lost the game.

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