



Rickshawing for Dummies

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SAY THE WORD “RICKSHAW” to someone stateside and he will likely picture a vaguely Roman two-wheeler pulled by a human in a conical hat. Although you do occasionally see this duo in certain parts of the world, the term rickshaw or auto-rickshaw now denotes a three-wheeled machine about the size and weight of a golf cart, with a chassis made of sheet metal and sidewalls made of particle board. A rickshaw has a windshield, but no doors. The roof is a kind of vinyl stretched across latticed piping bolted to the brittle quarter panels. Most modern rickshaws are equipped with a 150 c.c., two-stroke engine which requires a fuel mixture of gasoline and oil, as in a lawnmower. Behind the metal dashboard is a foam seat from which the driver mans the handlebars and monitors a lone gauge, the speedometer. There is a four-foot wide bench in the back for as many passengers as seem prudent.

In the spring of 2010, my old pal Travis and I tried to drive one such rickshaw, a late model Bajaj, across the Indian subcontinent as part of a charity event. This event was dreamt up by some Brits who rightly foresaw that in the post-post-West, the best way to encourage disaffected young professionals to take an interest in other countries is to don pith helmets and monocles, pull down ironic mutton chops, and rewrite the colonial impulse. It made sense to Travis and me,

in any case, and we signed on with a plan to get sponsors, then spend a couple of weeks in a race of sorts covering the 3,500 kilometers from the city of Kochi way in the deep south to the cliffside hamlet of Gangtok, up in the Himalayas between Nepal and Bhutan.

This seemed like a good idea right up until we actually landed in Bombay and had our first dip in Indian roads. Beyond making the travel arrangements and buying a wall map of India, we had neglected to do much preparation, except to review the U.S. State Department's website, which advised: "Travel by road in India is dangerous. A number of U.S. citizens have suffered fatal traffic accidents in recent years. . . . On Indian roads, the safest driving policy is to always assume that other drivers will not respond to a traffic situation in the same way you would in the United States." That turned out to be rather coy understatement, but at the time we interpreted such warnings to be loosely factual but exaggerated; whoever wrote for such sites, we reasoned, had to err on the side of caution and pessimism, like the functionaries who came up with the terror alert system or those lengthy lists of pharmaceutical side effects. Besides, we both had fairly extensive experience on the swarming roads of southeast Asia, so we thought we had a general sense of what we were in for.

Our impression changed in that ride from the airport. We had arrived in Bombay around midnight, and from the window of our cab—which, like all the black and yellow cabs in India, seemed three-quarter scale—we witnessed conditions on the outskirts of the city with the most expensive real estate in the world. Half-stoned on paan—that alluring narcotic chew made of betel leaves—our driver wove his way through potted roads, sometimes dirt, sometimes macadam, variously lighted, but always populated with a surprising range of traffic—cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles, bicycles, pushcarts, water buffalo harnessed to carts, pedestrians, dogs, cats, cows, and those unfortunate souls sleeping on or near the road. A flimsy cyclist wobbled into one of the open sewers that ran through that part of town, and it was unclear whether we had forced him to do so, or whether it was merely an intrepid short cut.

Travis smiled and told me to relax, that a few years prior the municipal government had banned rickshaws in Mumbai city limits. "This isn't necessarily a good indicator of what we'll see," he said. He was always full of interesting information.

We stayed in Bombay for a few days to do tourist things. We compared a working man's lunch, served in compartmentalized metal trays, to whatever they slung in the famed ex-pat café that had been destroyed by bomb in '08, only

to be rebuilt brighter and pricier than ever. We took in the great images of Shiva carved into the rock on an island off the coast, and we wandered around Ghandi's fittingly modest house, now filled with creepy dioramas. We went with everyone else to a bridge overlooking the slums so we might take pictures of women beating laundry against stone basins. Soon enough it was time make our way another 1000 kilometers south to Kochi, in the steamy state of Kerala, where we were to commence our rickshaw driving. But first we took an AC sleeper down to Panaji, capital of the old Portuguese enclave of Goa, where we planned to relax for a couple of days before embarking.

There we got our first true glimpse of the Indian duality made visible by the act of driving: once we got off the train, we chatted with Rakesh, a soft-spoken, affable cabbie who agreed to take us the hour-and-a-half to the beaches. We felt in good hands until we got out on open road, when Rakesh's general demeanor changed not so much to foaming, reckless fury, but rather to a kind of resignation that one need drive as maniacally as possible without frittering away one's brake pads, and that it was foolhardy to resist the rushing flow because it was all, as they say, of a piece with the eternal dance. Throughout the trip we noticed this duality—when not behind the wheel, we were treated to startling kindnesses that would have been inconceivable in the States (and even while driving, people sometimes flagged us to the shoulder, such as it was, to offer us fruit or take our picture or invite us out for a Coke at the next stopping place), and yet the road encouraged another plane of interaction that meant going as fast as possible and insinuating your vehicle into any square meter that was not at that instant otherwise occupied.

In that short trip to the beaches, I had more near-death experiences than on a ten-hour van ride through the Mekong delta in Southern Vietnam, and that driver had a glass eye and was jittery with amphetamine. We hurtled along at speeds dangerous even on the gracefully-engineered curves of the Autobahn, much less the blind turns on thin roads populated by the same traffic we had seen in Bombay. Rakesh passed with fanaticism, and would maintain his course on the wrong side of the road for alarmingly sustained periods, until the smaller oncoming vehicle (a motorcycle or rickshaw) would whip out of the way and rumble onto the littered shoulder; or, if the oncoming vehicle was larger, canny Rakesh would scream up as fast as he could and tuck in front of the vehicle on our side of the road. The most insane thing was that this behavior was apparently

the norm, and as he gunned it along cliffs and darted around slower-moving traffic, Rakesh also had to contend with everyone else doing the same, with varying degrees of success, mainly dependent on the top speed and acceleration of whatever was being driven. Once we arrived, though, Rakesh unloaded our packs and sheepishly poked the dirt with his sandal.

Shaken, we tried to unwind in Goa, but now that we had wider exposure to Indian roads, we couldn't help but think more vividly about the dismemberment clauses in the travel insurance we had purchased online. Even Travis betrayed some anxiety: "We could just stay here," he said, gesturing around at the calming beaches of Anjuna, the legendary hippie holdover where drop-outs from other countries replayed the Summer of Love every Wednesday night. "We could skip the race altogether and who would know?" I sipped my beer and ate my tiger prawns. The philosophical problem, I pointed out, was that *we* would know we were chickenshit. And so of course we did go. As we waited for our ride back to the train station, we watched cows sleeping on the beach and people splashing in the surf, and it seemed symbolic that this most beautiful of spots, with the spa-like waters of the Arabian Sea, contained also the deadliest undertow on the subcontinent.

We made it to Kochi after passing a night in close third-class quarters with two women—the wives of Navy pilots stationed on the Nicobar Islands—and their several children (the women told us repeatedly that they would not drive any distance in India in a tank, much less a rickshaw, and that the roads in Kerala were particularly treacherous). Owing to various distractions in Goa, we were running behind schedule, and had missed the three days of "orientation," during which time we were supposed to learn to drive the rickshaw. So we arrived the night before the event's commencement, when the organizers were hosting a party at Bolgatty Palace, a colonial estate turned hotel on an island in the waters off Fort Cochin. Having just found a place to sleep a couple of hours before, we rushed around but still missed the designated ferries over to the palace, and so had to hire rickshaw drivers to take us the long way around, where a bridge spanned to Bolgatty Island. Once there, though, the setting was worth it: a Dutch mansion built in the eighteenth century, Bolgatty Palace had the requisite columns and countless windows framed in teak. There we felt feted, coddled by Western-style toilets with flushing mechanisms. They had set up outside, and

there was a stage and buffet placed around the manicured grounds that seemed in constant struggle with the encroaching jungle vegetation. Onstage there were fire dancers and spark-spewing demonstrations of ancient battle techniques. There was also, significantly, a bar. We ordered our customary Kingfisher Strongs and found a couple of chairs in the mounting darkness.

There were about sixty other teams, many more than we had anticipated, and though it seemed like a party, there was an underlying sense of dread that the excessive drinking was designed to extinguish. There were only one or two other American teams, and the rest were mainly British, Aussie, and assorted other European nationalities. One grizzled man of indeterminate origin had run the race before and was strolling around telling tales about places like Bihar, where he had nearly been forced off the road in the middle of the night, and where he had been obliged to brandish a tire iron to ward off would-be bandits. He had also rolled his rickshaw down a cliff, but had the whole thing repaired for a couple hundred dollars—his theory was that rickshaws were virtually impossible to total. We palmed our chins and drank some more. Stories like these circulated, and as much as everyone pretended to be facing the morning with unbridled excitement, there were whispers of trepidation. But Travis and I agreed that hazardous as it seemed, at least we were a million miles from the familiar, in a fool's paradise all our own.

Then the fire dancing stopped, the ambient music quieted, and someone announced that it was Earth Hour. This was March 27, 2010—a Sunday night, and some activist or entrepreneur had convinced people around the globe to join in the dream of having all the lights on Earth turned out for a single hushed hour to show solidarity for the planet we share. The lights in and around the hotel dimmed in blocks, and we sat illuminated by the remaining torchflame, drinking our beer, watching a new group of dancers try not to burn themselves, and thinking about the morning. It was pleasant for a few minutes, but then in the darkness I could see people rustling with their iPhones to check e-mail and show off their fundraising websites. The very second Earth Hour was over, in fact, the lights were raised again, and a locally-famous DJ showed up to spin. People overtook the stage and it transformed into a dance floor. As one of the waiters assured someone that of course none of the buffet food was spicy, the DJ played “Rasputin,” and the mostly Euro crowd went nuts—the song is Boney M’s disco hit from the late 1970s that you would hear in the sloppy après-ski dens in St.

Anton or in certain multi-story clubs in Majorca, but very rarely in the States, a song that weirdly chronicles the life of the Russian mystic and monk—everyone went wild and spilt their beer as they bounced on the spongy makeshift dance floor. It struck me then, my brain functioning fuzzily due to alcohol and heat, that maybe the world actually was as hyper-connected as everyone kept saying, that there was no place left to go beyond the bounds of Wikipedia and Google. This notion made me nostalgic and slightly depressed. On the late ferry back to Fort Cochin, someone vomited off the side, and the other Americans passed out in a pile of life preservers.

The day we embarked was easily the hottest and most humid we had yet experienced in India. We hungover teams met in a cricket field to commence the affair, and before the official send-off, Travis and I had about ten minutes of driving practice between us. Travis did fairly well because he has a background with motorcycles, but I barely made it around the practice area; stalling, cursing, and sweating, I kicked the miniaturized front tire and left the first day's driving to him.

This is how you operate a rickshaw: first, if you're taller than five-six or so, you fold yourself into the front, knees pressed up into the rigid and razor-edged sheet of stamped metal that serves as a dashboard. Grasp the handlebars as you would a motorcycle, the left side being the clutch, the right side your accelerator. But unlike a motorcycle, the brake is on the floor, jutting an uncomfortable six inches from the bottom, so if you are in any manner of traffic, you need to keep your right foot hovering expectantly over the pedal at all times. There is a long handle on the floor to your left that looks like an oversized emergency brake. When you are ready to start, you turn the key and jerk that handle up as fast as you can—catch it right and the engine rip-starts like a lawn mower, and you feather the gas and hope the engine doesn't stall out. Tuck some paan behind your lower lip, check your mirrors, and you're ready to rock.

The race itself began with a premature victory lap through the center of Fort Cochin, and as all the rickshaws sputtered around town in a long line, people came out to smile and shake their heads. Once this lap broke, the rickshaws dispersed with alacrity that both Travis and I remarked upon, and fifteen minutes after leaving the cricket field, we were on our own, and eerily so. Not being equipped with a fuel gauge, we thought it wise to first fill our tank. We

discovered at the station that you can't simply ask for a fill up—the attendant needs to know exactly how many liters you need, and how many milliliters of oil you want mixed in. Because we of course didn't know how much gas we had, nor what the tank held, we guessed at a few liters and had them fill our spare can. I ran across the street to buy water and snacks, and we congratulated ourselves on our preparedness.

As Travis had become the default driver, at least for the first day, I was the default navigator. Unfortunately, the tool I had at my disposal was a 3' x 4' German map that illustrated only major highways, many of which were future predictions, and so was not especially useful. We knew we needed to head northeast out of Kerala, and it actually wasn't too difficult to locate the road because there were only a couple of big east-west routes running through the state. The flip side was that it explained the warning from the women on the train: all traffic was crowded onto the same roads, which wound their way almost immediately up from the flat coastal region to the Nilgiri Hills, where they further narrowed until shoulders vanished. It was impossible to see around most bends, although this didn't stop the fiendish bus drivers from storming down-mountain on the wrong side of the road as we chugged along, trying to stick as close as possible to the rocky outcroppings on our side.

Once on open road, it became apparent that a single, inexperienced driver was incapable of taking in all the chaos at once, and so we quickly developed a spotter system whereby the navigator doubled as a look-out. Although we could not control the barrage of vehicles coming at us from all sides (and indeed people or animals could appear in a split-second, and from strange directions), we could be duly diligent before we attempted to maneuver the rickshaw anywhere off course from the extreme side of the road. Concentrating, gripping the handlebars determinedly (in Bangalore he would need to buy himself driving gloves), Travis focused on the few feet immediately in front of him as I hung out the side to check the traffic around and behind us, often whipping my head back in at the last second before it was clipped by a close-passing bus or motorcycle. At first our exchanges were shrill and panicked as he would call out "Am I CLEAR?!" and I would dart my head out to take a look, jerk it back in as something whizzed by, then back out for a closer look as he edged over to pass a slow moving truck. "Wait, car. Car! CAR!" I would scream. "Watch out for this guy! No, he's in the dirt on your left for some reason. OK, you can go after this bus—WAIT, there's a

motorcycle. Now, go. Go. GO!” And he would go, and we would edge around the truck, which on a hill moved slower than a water buffalo cart, our little engine whining at full throttle as we overtook, watching vehicles shoot past us going downhill, and staring at the coming bend with nothing but hope that something wouldn’t come around to smash us head on.

This went on for hours as we plied deeper into the Hills and the Indian interior. Eventually we both grew more confident and developed an easier rhythm, and we made it to our first hotel without any collisions with bigger vehicles, just one of which would have done us in. At that point, we didn’t have any plans as far as a specific place we were trying to reach by the end of the day, but we did realize that, as slow going as it had been, if we had any hope of making it to Gangtok, we would have to leave soon after daybreak and drive without much stopping until dusk—especially since we had plans to spend two nights each in Bangalore and Varanasi along the way. As it turned out, by the following night, we had made it to Bangalore and stayed the next day because some friends at Infosys had invited us for lunch and a tour of their crazy futuristic campus, with its pyramids and electrified fences. That night we roamed the city looking for driving gloves (weight lifting gloves ultimately did the trick) and seriously considered buying a baseball bat for protection but finally abandoned the idea because they were relatively rare and thus expensive. Since we didn’t know enough about the comparative destructive power of cricket bats, we headed north from Bangalore unarmed.

I learned to drive the rickshaw on the mercifully empty highways of Tamil Nadu. Those roads were dreams: four macadam lanes, with paved shoulders even, painted markings indicating where discrete lanes were, well-planned on- and off-ramps, and a center divider, framed in concrete, with a hedge in the middle. In the central part of the state we began to see road crews, mostly of women, whose sole tasks were to trim these hedges and sweep the gutters with little handheld brooms. Once I got the hang of the rickshaw’s idiosyncratic shifting and braking, I gained a yeoman’s confidence in its operation, and Travis and I alternated driving up the long, often desolate spine of India. While still in Kerala, we had wondered whether we would ever be away from city, town, or extended suburb, but as we pushed on north from Tamil Nadu and eventually through the states of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh, the roads grew poorer, the Western trappings of guardrails and gas

stations disappeared, and the driving became differently dangerous and even sometimes monotonous.

There are few substantial cities along that route in central India, and some days we made great time if the roads were decent (downhill, the rickshaw could do about 58 kph, tops, but even on good roads we couldn't push it this hard for too long because it would overheat; on days when it was possible to go at top speed, we had to take breaks to let the engine cool). Sometimes the roads deteriorated almost before our eyes, and we found ourselves on rutted dirt byways, which seemed insulting only until they gave way to what amounted to dry riverbeds: rock-studded gullies with canyons and craters so vast that tiny sleeping lambs could escape notice until we were almost upon them. On these types of roads, we could go as slowly as 5 kph, which is little better than walking pace, and all our bones and joints felt damaged from the constant jostling of crater after crater.

The most interesting times came when we were diverted off "highway"—an increasingly common occurrence—and found ourselves instead being pushed even farther afield, into even more remote villages where ratty notices advocating Telangana separatism hung limp in the humidity. That region of Andhra Pradesh, we learned later, was a sort of free-floating domestic colony with little in the way of political representation or economic robustness—a depressingly high percentage of farmers were killing themselves over irrigation problems. Rumbling through such places, there was a double sense of dislocation as all echo of anyone but us traveling from any point A to B was vanished. We found ourselves, again and again, in the thrall of village life; moving through human rivers of traffic, around reeded homes and thatched stalls that were barber shops or leather tanneries; or else directed, for a handful of rupees to a boy or man waving a switch in the air, on a "special detour" through farmland: these detours were often through rice paddies with elevated walkways that seemed designed for people, not rickshaws, and yet there we were, and we would rumble for hours, fearing a rock or rut would send us toppling over the side into stagnant, bug-breeding paddy water.

Sometimes, the roads became instantly, insanely, busy: in those countless places in India which are not quite towns but still larger than villages, all stages of life seemed to be conducted within fifty feet of the road, and there would be a messy sprawl following its contours. The outskirts were usually marked by heavy trucks lining the roadsides while their drivers performed surgery with

whatever means available, so if we had been edged too far over by larger vehicles we had to weave around severed driveshafts or splatterings of greasy bearings. Past the trucks were often rusting hulks of mangled, burned-out cars left to bake in the sun, then low-slung tents made from blue tarps and discarded corrugated metal. Then the confusion would coalesce into the thousand tiny stalls that comprise rural commercial life—fruit and baked goods stands, but also battery stalls, bucket stalls, cell phone stalls, paan stalls, paint stalls—and amid these stalls people hawking ice cream, candles, onions, likenesses of Ganesha, people threading through the street with lengths of pipe and coils of hose, people sleeping or arguing or generally carrying out their lives as the odd cow wandered lethargically through piles of garbage.

It was in such places where we began to think of driving as pouring water into a flowing river, where we came to understand how rickshawing could be like walking meditation. The theory of walking meditation is that you are completely focused on a particular task, such as walking or tending garden, so that your attention does not wander to memories or anticipations of the future, and you are utterly in the moment. Your developing heat rash, your underwater mortgage, your long-standing rivalries and lusts, your metaphysical position in the universe—all these things cease to be relevant as you fold yourself into the flow so completely that your reactions are not even reactions but extensions of a larger web of action and meaning that does not require conscious thought. Travis and I found that the rickshaw could produce a strangely calming effect because it expunged all extraneous thoughts.

This is nice to say, and it was true for certain stretches of time, but things went downhill after Varanasi. We had planned to stay a couple of days in Varanasi, the old city of Benares, the holiest place in all of India, where people come to wash themselves in the Ganges River, said to be the maiden of Brahma himself. All tourists know that the city is the most auspicious place for a Hindu to have his body burned after death, in one of the biers lining the Ghats along the river. The Ghats are the steeply canted steps leading down from the buildings along the water into the Ganges itself, and this is the heart of old Varanasi, the place that foreigners come to photograph and locals come not to mourn exactly, but to see off their friends and relatives, where householders bathe in the polluted water and where ascetics sit immobilely on outcroppings. In Varanasi we paused before the final push into the Himalayas, reflecting on the spiritual dimension

of rickshaw driving, eating decent food for the first time in recent memory, and absorbing the rites that occurred in surprising places around the city. We had the rickshaw serviced, and then left, somewhat reluctantly, turning east from the northern trajectory we had undertaken for the past nine days, heading out of Uttar Pradesh and into the state of Bihar.

Known locally as among the poorest and most dangerous states in India, Bihar was at that time awash in Naxalite ideology, the Naxals being the Maoist insurgents either roaming or ruling (depending on who you asked) the parts of the country the British used to call the Central Provinces. The prime minister would go on television and say the Naxals were India's Number One security threat, while Arundhati Roy continued to write articles and give interviews in which she supported their general position, if not their violent methods. What we knew then was that a few days before we rolled into Bihar, there had been a tip that the Naxals had set up a forest training camp in Chhattisgarh, and between 70 and 80 police and paramilitary forces swept in, only to be trapped and gunned down in an ambush. The English language papers carried headlines that read: "SLAUGHTER!"—but for only one day, and then the story faded. This seemed strange to me—imagine the media coverage if some CPUSA splinter group killed 70 National Guard in the Chesapeake watershed—but when I brought it up to someone, he just shrugged. "We have a billion people in this country," he said. "You can't expect to please everybody."

The roads in Bihar were predictably poor, and when they passed through towns, it was difficult—or impossible, without protracted discussions with locals—to find the thread that went through to the other end. We had inklings of trouble trying to navigate one of these towns—hot, crowded, dusty, like any dozens of towns we had seen, but this one was undergoing some work on its main artery. To say it was "under construction" implies a certain amount of activity, cones and signs, or at least crews and a suggestion of equipment, but none of this was the case. One half of the road was raised a foot higher with newly-poured concrete and menacing staves of rebar sticking out into the unfinished side. A consequence of this development project was that both lanes of traffic—and an unofficial pedestrian/bicycle/animal lane—were collapsed down to little better than a car-width, and there was no room to maneuver since this traffic went up within inches of the shops on the left and the raised concrete on the right. There it took us hours to get the single cursed kilometer through town, during

which time I scraped the side of an obstinate Tata that refused to yield although any objective observer could plainly see it was my turn to proceed. In the whirl of name calling and finger-pointing that ensued, an English-speaker in a suit materialized and talked down the Tata driver, then took us aside and advised us not to speak to anyone or accept help once we got out of town. This naturally left a bad taste in our mouths, but we thanked him and pressed on. Twenty minutes later, moving still at a walking pace, there was more excitement. A drunk guy suddenly hopped in the rickshaw, sitting not in the back with me, but up front with Travis (who had taken over after I nearly came to blows over the fender bender); this guy belched and shouted and wedged himself next to Travis on the one-person driver's seat, slung an arm over his shoulder, and began to animatedly produce a number of documents attesting to the fact that he, too, was licensed to operate a rickshaw.

We made it through the town, but things commenced in getting worse from there. On open road in Bihar, we headed roughly east, but were not exactly sure where we were since none of the scarce road signs (in Hindi) matched anything on our decaying map, and we found ourselves alternating between fairly-respectable divided lane highways and utterly absurd mounds of dirt and powdery camel-colored dust which when kicked up settled into pores, nostrils, skin creases, and engine parts. Without warning we would transition from highway to motocross rally, and would have to battle up and down ungodly obstacles—of more dirt, cement, rebar—and dodge the crazily painted trucks causing dust storms of Biblical proportions. We toured these theoretical works in progress, in reality clogged attempts on which people had set up mud ovens and woven beds while livestock roamed free, choking on dust and hardly breathing in the unkind Indian sun. Then, as the oasis appears to the desperate desert wanderer, we would be teased with half a click of sealed road, only to find over the next hillock the thousandth culvert or unfinished bridge that had to be gone around. We pushed farther and farther off our map, deeper into an arid land where dhoti-wrapped men attempted to raise the same sad crops from chalky soil.

Then there was the end of the road. It was dusk, the witching hour for us because if there's one thing more ill considered than taking on Indian roads, it's attempting to do so at night. And yet there was the incontestable fact that this unmarked road was not going to take us farther into anything. After a few minutes of harried consultation, we decided to put all our experience with

special detours to good use and strike out on a raised footpath heading north through some rice paddies. We bumped along in a simmering panic until two men emerged from the brush wanting to know what we were doing. Although our Hindi was as negligible as their English, we eventually gathered that we were on a path to Nepal, not to the Bihar Hyatt as we had hoped, and since we couldn't cross into another country with our visas, we turned around, carefully so, nearly toppling over the side as we hand-pushed a three-point turn. By the time we arrived back at road's end, it was nearly dark.

We used the light remaining to survey our supplies. In addition to the map, we had nearly a liter of warm water and a bag of candy that we had magnanimously brought along to hand out to children. Travis had bought some fried dough balls from a village street vendor that morning, but those were gone. There was the mosquito-repelling coil that I had found in a hotel room. This seemed a stroke of luck, and I set it up on the dash, but we later learned that it required a special plug-in device to work. Our cell phone battery was dead, which was irrelevant since there wasn't reception anyway, but we decided it still would have been nice to know the time. As the darkness deepened, we pulled on pants and long sleeves, then doused ourselves with DEET. Within the hour it became so profoundly dark that we didn't even see the old man who shuffled up, muttering something we couldn't understand and brandishing a walking stick. The mosquitoes were equally unwelcoming, even as we ourselves were nauseated from DEET, so we wrapped towels around our heads and necks and hunkered down. Conversation grew dull after a few depressed minutes, and we took turns dozing against the rickshaw while the other kept watch—against what, we didn't know—but an hour or two into the night (it seemed we'd been in the dark for hours and hours, but it was probably only 10 P.M.) feral dogs starting circling, and when one nipped at Travis's leg, he jerked awake shouting and the dogs snarled and yelped and neither of us slept much after that.

Those hallucinatory hours in the dark, on the edge of India where the road ended, were like being in a sensory deprivation tank. Slowly eroded by the sun after twelve hours of driving, we had no food and little water; our eyes had adjusted to the dark but there wasn't much to see beyond the road; the temperature had dropped from the sweltering heat of the day so it was at equilibrium with our own over-heated temperatures; except for the scratching and snorting of dogs and the buzz of mosquitoes, there was no sound, nothing to mark the time.

The rest of our lives seemed stripped away, if even for a single minute, a single hour, a single night. And so we passed the night in a floating state, reflecting on where we were and what we had done to get there, contemplating the people who clearly lived around but were themselves out of sight, wondering what exact minute it was as the moon moved through the sky and we counted stars never before known to us.

The proper way to end such an undertaking is not to actually reach the finish and drink again with those people we had last seen on a cricket field in Kochi. Nor to be kidnapped by Naxals, as you might expect, nor to die in a head-on collision with a bus. Better and more fitting for one of us to have contracted a villainous case of gastroenteritis, which after pushing Travis's temperature north of 104 would have compelled us to admit him to the hospital once back in Patna, the fly-infested capital of Bihar. As he recovered there, I would have negotiated with a parking-wallah to leave our beloved rickshaw behind, and he would agree, but reluctantly, because he would not be sure what I was doing with a rickshaw in the first place, nor why or for how long I was leaving it in his care. The proper way to end a run through India on a rickshaw, in other words, we learned surviving the roads themselves, which was possible only by throwing ourselves at blind turns, gunning it on the wrong side into oncoming traffic, pouring water into water. Based on such principles, completion as such was not desirable because it would have meant checking India off the list—much better to wander Bihar, land of the Buddha, to bring a fever down with some meds cadged from the rival pharmacy across the alley, to hand the baffled parking-wallah twenty dollars and some crumpled documentation, to admire a sadhu sleeping naked in the train station, to disappear elsewhere.