

Homecoming



by Avtar Singh

A Christmas homecoming to forget: immigration officials in a bad mood, a Delhi fog that was a ghost of decades past, and barricades in central Delhi forcing a midnight detour. The attitude of the immigrationaries and fog were out of my control, but I should have figured on the detour. It isn't like I didn't know what had been going on in the city while I was away.

The first I had heard, as with so many things these days, was on Facebook. The surge of mostly inchoate outrage led me to the news outlets. The story of that terrible crime filtered through to those of us that were away over the course of the next few days. The rape itself, the spontaneous reaction, the palpable feeling that "enough was finally enough", the depressingly predictable outcome. A baffled political leadership, sanctimony flavoured with idiocy in Parliament, a media response utterly untempered by sensitivity and then the ham-handed finale, with Delhi's protectors lathi-charging people rallying for more protection.

I didn't want to come home. Outside were clean parks and well-lit streets on which cars behaved themselves. Inside was paani and bijli. I know the place I was in has its own issues – and nobody's claiming that rape is situated exclusively in the third world. But

who among us who has ever been abroad has not been guilty of that quick thought, that comparison between home and away, that "if only" feeling that can only be pushed down by a determined enumeration of all the things that make India so dear to us, and the authors of guidebooks: the colour, the chaos, the "life".

Life, in Delhi: Water cannons outside La Dixit's house. The Delhi Police and Delhi Government pointing fingers at each other, when they should be standing together in contrition. Sub-divisional Magistrates getting into the media act, statements being extracted from the victim while she was still under critical care. Alive, it should be said. Not dead, as some media outlets persisted in reporting. Farcical. Sick-making. On so many levels.

As in Delhi, so the country. A legislature that doesn't legislate, an executive that's cheapened by its equivocations, a judiciary systemically incapable of rendering timely justice. Is there any wonder that people are protesting, and is there anyone who thinks this is still only about rape?

While away, I read stories by people whose opinions I respect. The testimony of rape survivors, the cool-headed words of women who pointed out among the hysteria that, monstrous as it is, being raped and being dead aren't the same thing. I read the sharpening debate over the death penalty, castigation and the merits of summary justice versus the drudgery of a lifetime of penal servitude. Emotions were high, the volume was up, and through it all ran a thread I returned to again and again. That to think of these men as beasts is wrong. Because we're all embedded and implicated, by our actions and omissions, in the world that

these men sprung from, a world that lets them think that it's okay to do something like this, separately *and* together, and to return to work the next day as if nothing had happened. That these are issues of freedom and its lack, of independence on your own terms and being possessed by someone else, of sexual agency and who has it: indeed, basic issues of what makes a creature human. Our culture, at best, hasn't done enough to address them. Worst case? Most of us, even after all this, don't even know they exist. That problem's civilisational, unfortunately, and there's sweet f-all the government can do about that. And I don't mean in the short term. That's not the sort of game I want any government of mine in anyway.

So what can the government do? Address what's in its power. Answer the "if only" question Indians abroad return with for those who've never left. Give us traffic lights that work at night, so people have the

option of obeying them. Give us streetlights that work, so public places aren't empty after dark.

Share information about sexual offenders with each other,

if not the public, and please, raise your convictions game. Organise public transport so people don't have to use call-centre cabs and the like. Have police where they're needed instead of guarding second-rate politicians and celebrities. Give cops the sensitisation to deal with victims of assault, sexual and otherwise, whatever their gender, caste or sexual identity.

None of this is rocket science. None of this is impossible. The tragedy is that it's already more than most people expect anymore.

The civilisational stuff? That's up to the people. We've all got a lot of thinking to do.



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METROPOLIS Strange tales from our international brethren

Time Out Shanghai



As everyone was preparing for the end of the world, a certain entrepreneur and inventor in Shanghai was selling arks. Yang

Zongfu, creator of Atlantis Arks has made a six-ton stainless steel and titanium alloy ball, which can withstand temperatures of up to 1,700° C. Measuring four metres in diameter, the yellow arks found at least 20 takers, who were willing to shell out about \$800,000 for the survivalist gear.

Time Out Abu Dhabi



From camel beauty contests and races, to actually eating the animal, the entire beast is utilised in the Emirates. And

with dog and horse whisperers aplenty, it's no surprise that *Time Out Abu Dhabi* found a camel whisperer. Mubarak Al Hameli has been around camels since his childhood and is a consultant for Al Ain Dairy. Here future camel wranglers can learn everything from how to care for the creatures, to how best to butcher them.

Time Out Hong Kong



India may still be excited about Comicon, but Hong Kong experienced a perhaps stranger convention this December when

Santa came visiting, at the Santacon. This annual Santa flashmob takes over the town, and participation is open to all. As hoards of rotund men with flowing white beards and belly wobbling laughs invade the city this year, a veteran Father Christmas dispensed a list of dos and don'ts to *Time Out Hong Kong* readers. Attendees were instructed to "go with the flow", but not dress as elves (it leads to Santa-elf hostility); they were also meant to address everyone as Santa and carry their own belt.