

# Sewer aroma swells in India

## Americans often take the sweet smell of home for granted

I remember the smells, mostly, of India. And thinking, as I photographed some children playing by a drainage ditch, that any picture, even movies, can never tell this truth about the third world: It smells.

The drainage ditch in my rainy snapshot is a sewer.

It runs untreated to the river, outletting near the place where cattle are washed on their way to market. Fifty yards downstream the women wash their clothes against the stones.

Their whites are whiter, their colors brighter.

India is a tropical country. Things don't go sour there, they rot outright. And everywhere there are open sewers. Even in the cities.

I remember eating in a restaurant in Madras; the food was excellent. When I went to the toilet I was surprised by a Westernism I hadn't seen in weeks: a urinal. Ah, civilization!

Then standing over it I realized the drain ended abruptly above a trough cut into the concrete floor. A stream of urine ran in through a hole in the wall and out into the alley to a ditch.

The smells of India awoke me to a world of smells back home. Antiseptic, perfumed, covered over. For weeks, back in the United States I missed the heady smoke of sandalwood burned along the Persian-carpeted hallways of a high-ceilinged English hotel.

A whole world of sense exists, as it were, up our noses. So much of the emotional impact of reality rides the carrier wave of smell.

If you doubt this, think of the difference between the sweat of sex and the sweat of fear. They smell different. Totally different. Only we have no words for the difference.

Our vocabulary for dealing with and describing these olfactory differences is skimpy—a poor cousin to the facility of our language for sight and sound; the word "chortle" for instance, how descriptive! Or the word "azure."

But someone had to make up those words; why shouldn't we make up our own words for the neglected sense? Even the word "smell" has negative connotations. As if we would give up being animals entirely.

But I leave the demonstration of this as an exercise for the reader.

Back to India! (And often I return, in dreams, to the dust choked streets of the dry season, to the cacophony of car horns and the smells of India.)

I remember, one of my strongest memories of the place, traveling by land through the crowded, chaotic streets of Bevamaram: every intersection a brush with disaster.

We passed a citrus stand on the street. I never saw it but I know; it smelled of oranges.

I may never recapture what I knew then. Suddenly the smell of oranges became a perfume that spoke to me in volumes—a whole

world of pleasure. I knew that the smell of oranges over feces, cattle and 100,000 people was a kind of gateway out of the noise and dust and stink of the city.

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That smell was like a glimpse of a quiet garden suddenly torn from me. I felt like weeping.

The people of India bathe often. They considered their conquerors, the British, smelly and dirty—and it was probably true. And if you think it's a put-down, all my talk

about the smells of the place, you haven't read closely enough. But India stinks.

One is choked there, the American is, with the smell of human excrement and rot. It's a country where a man (at any rate) can squat by the side of the road for a moment smoking a cigarette and ride away on his bicycle refreshed.

It's a country that teaches the Westerner just how much of what we believe about the human body and the human condition is assumed, without a whole lot of reason.

Travel is broadening, they say. It can open whole areas of sense and sensibility to a young person who is willing to undergo the shock, which is always a shock of recognition.

— Mark Baldrige is a senior English major and Arts & Entertainment editor for the Daily Nebraskan.



courtesy of Mark Baldrige

Top left: The Taj Mahall, bottom right, a taxi in India.

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