



1. Awe

We stumbled out, before dawn, still a little stunned with sleep, into chill moist air, and started walking across the city to Sassoon Dock to watch fishing boats bring in the first catch, a few of us who'd met in the airport and shared a ride into the city and the same hotel, travelers.

The main streets of Bombay that early morning were still and quiet, little traffic. We passed high-rise office buildings and big, rich stores, a few just beginning to open here and there: shoes, electronics, books, pottery.

We cut over to the back alleys running parallel to the main boulevard and came upon an entire neighborhood of people asleep out in the open, in the dirt, on the walks, in the streets, on top of walls, under cars, wherever they could, lying scattered as if a bomb had gone off.

As we walked, some of them began to wake up. We tried to slip through, inconspicuous. Some men were naked, children barefoot. Women wore grimy sarees. Everyone was thin. A man knelt to wash himself under a faucet, another looked up from where he lay, dazed. Others rinsed their faces from puddles of water in the street.

We wound our way through the streets, people staring at us: a group of five westerners with small backpacks.

We'd made a simple plan—to walk the city and then go a day south to the palm-fringed, soft white sand beaches in the state of Goa and lie around there in the sun for a week or so before heading further into India.