

DIARY

Peter Costello

The Ganges flows swiftly by the Vaishali District of Northern India. As they have for centuries, the villagers who live on its banks are washing in the water. It is suggested that a dip in the great river might purify my soul. I take off my shoes but the sight of excrement floating down the waterway quite puts me off. You can't immerse yourself in that kind of thing without some of it sticking. It is like Australian politics.

I am visiting some health projects funded by the World Bank. The District Collector of Vaishali welcomes me. He is a member of the Indian Administrative Service — a service chosen on merit — which allocates officers to local, state and national public service positions. He is highly educated and articulate. He tells me he is responsible for the delivery of all the public services in this district of more than three million people. The word 'Collector' is a relic from the days of the East India Company when adventurous young Englishmen were sent out to India to collect revenues for the company's shareholders. Along the way they collected an empire. Surely this must rate as one of the greatest shareholder returns of all time.

Vaishali is in the State of Bihar, one of the poorest of India. Its Chief Minister is cutting a real reputation as a reformer. One of the innovative laws he has introduced is 'Right to Service' legislation which specifies time limits within which government must provide its services. If that is not done, the public servant responsible is personally fined. They see this as a way to fight corruption, since it takes away the ability of the public service to slow things down or speed them up in return for a little bit of 'facilitation'. Bihar has a population more than 100 million people. Compare that to New South Wales or Victoria. It is nice to hear a State Premier who has an ambitious policy agenda.

The village huts have no electricity and no running water. My mobile phone goes off as I am sitting on a dirt floor talking with some locals. They



work as bonded labourers. They don't have phones. Most of them can't read. Their literacy rate is around three per cent. The health program is explained through picture books. This is India. Mobile phone coverage has arrived before literacy. It's as if the country has leapfrogged in front

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of itself. There is enormous disparity in wealth and education, in sophistication and backwardness. It has always been thus. Maybe it always will be.

The government precinct of 'New' Delhi was designed by the British Architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and completed in 1929. The Palace of the Viceroy looks down a broad Colonnade to the India Gate, a memorial to those Indians who fell in the service of the Empire during the first world war. As the representative of the King-Emperor in London, the Viceroy presided over lesser royals such as the Indian Princes and Maharajas. As I walk up the Colonnade to the official offices of the Finance Ministry and Prime Minister's Department, I notice a column simply inscribed: 'Australia to India MCMXXX'. The other Dominions of the Empire — Canada, New Zealand and South Africa — have done the same. It looks like a welcome from fellow siblings who hoped that India too would become a Dominion under the Crown.

India was granted Independence in 1947. In 1950 it declared itself a Republic. It's a curious coincidence that India and Australia share the same

National Day — 26 January — which means that year after year I have politely declined invitations to Republic Day in favour of invitations to Australia Day festivities. The grand buildings of Lutyens were built for an Empire that only lasted another two decades. It is strange how many taxpayer-funded buildings come to commemorate folly rather than foresight.

Winston Churchill was a formidable opponent of Indian independence. He famously described Mahatma Gandhi as 'a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well-known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Vice-regal palace'. Nehru, on the other hand was a Barrister of the Inner Temple. I go to visit Nehru's house in Delhi, which has been turned into a museum. He lived well. There is a lovely photograph of him returning as Prime Minister of India to his old school. He is in Indian dress and is being cheered by the English schoolboys in their winged collars. Nehru and Churchill were both old Harrovians. It is said that battles were won on the playing fields of Eton. Were empires lost in the classrooms of Harrow?

'Do you know Ricky Ponting?' is the question I am most often asked by taxi drivers once they have established I am from Australia. This usually leads to a discussion of how he compares with Sachin Tendulkar, who is doing a little better in the Indian series against England than Ricky has done in the series against South Africa. As it turns out I do know Ricky and this allows me to get on famously with drivers who, as a result, usually double the fare or ask for even more. I feel I cannot let down Punter by appearing mean or churlish when it comes to parting with my money.

As we are taking the trip out to Indira Gandhi International Airport to fly home I am asked by one last driver if I know Ricky Ponting. I look in my wallet and see I have no rupees left. 'Never heard of him,' I tell the driver. My wife smiles: 'You are learning about India,' she says.