

india TRAVELS

the struggles & honest
experiences of a
peripatetic
small business owner
& mother journeying
through life &
love &
India

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The sun has risen over the squalor and fleets of overburdened ancient trucks, some literally toppled over on the highway by the weight of their unwieldy loads. Dogs run everywhere, hungry and anxious. The world is cloaked in a fog much worse than in Delhi proper. Fires burn all around, garbage and cow dung patties and wood. And then there are the very tall, ominous looking chimneys that rise up mysteriously across this landscape. I wonder if some might be brickworks, others clearly just factories belching out more dark smoke. My eyes burn now worse than they have yet on this trip, though they have often, old lung issues flaring up after mostly years of clear breathing. Maybe it's also because the lungs are considered by Eastern Practitioners a kind of grief center, revealing the fact that I can't help but experience some empathic suffering for this land and its people. And too, this is the first time I have stepped so far away geographically from my failing marriage, so there is much needed processing that has been able to occur, however silently so...

We're on the highway starting our 10-hour drive from Delhi to Jodhpur with a stopover in Jaipur. That is the intention anyhow. I am here again in this

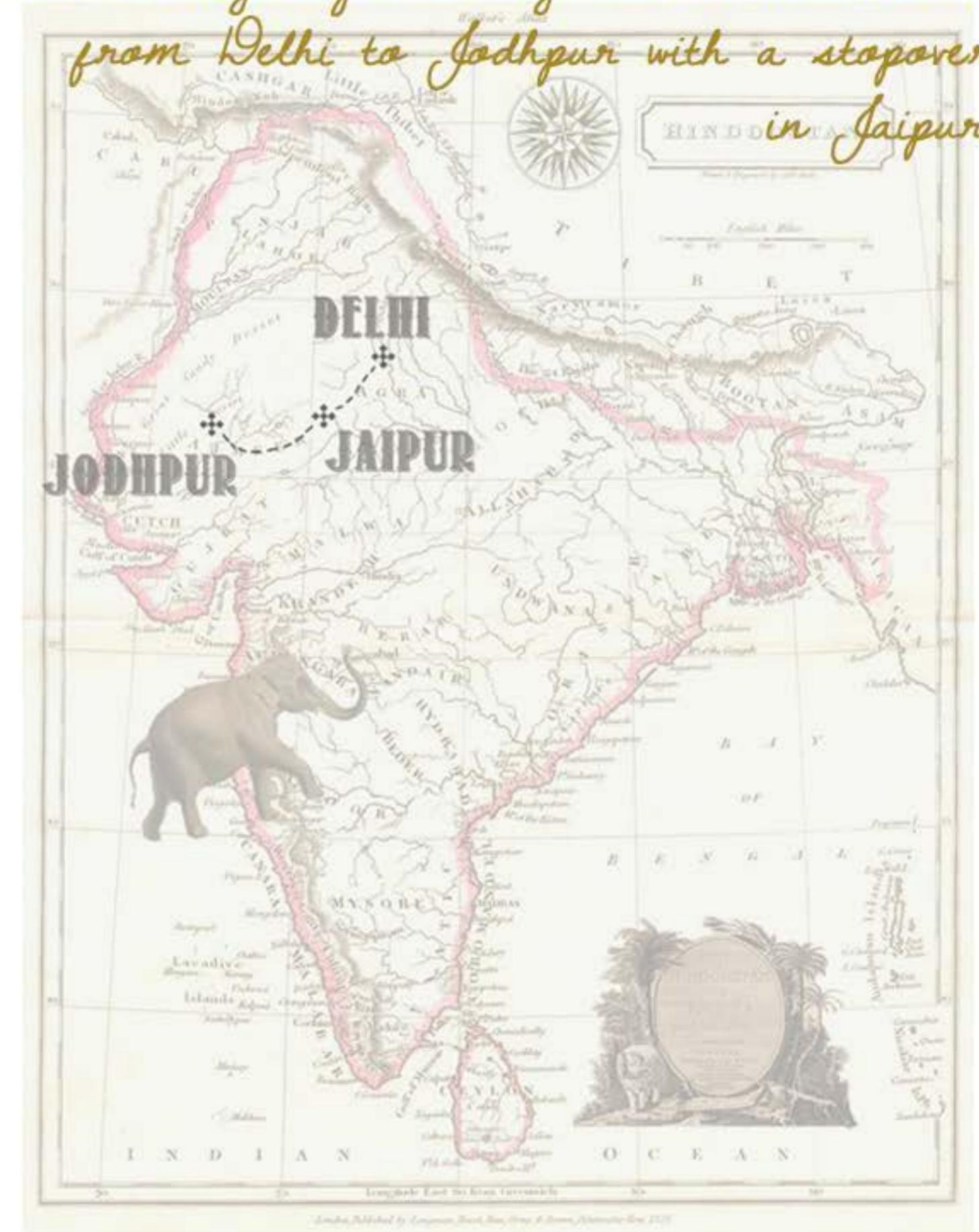
crazy and wonderful place called India to purchase textiles, furniture, jewelry and tabletop items for my growing small business, a tiny shop and online emporium called Nectar. We have a schedule that I plan to keep: two or three hours in the first city to break up the long car ride with a necessary reprieve, hit the open-air markets, begin a preliminary hunt there for some textiles and jewelry, grab a quick lunch, then push off to Jodhpur- the city to source furniture. I've never been to Jaipur, it's larger cousin city; I hear it's beautiful, ancient, rich, with similarly decrepit evidence of the grandeur of bygone royalty. It's going to be a long day.

We're in an oddly comfortable minivan, fully equipped with recline-able seats and a working AC, an anesthetized and safe chariot to carry us as if in a gilded bubble through utter destitution. This place is hard to fully capture in mere words-- the contrast of development, modernity, some extreme wealth and lavishness (i.e. month long extravagant weddings; palaces), the literally thousands of new massive high rises being built across this crazy sprawling country all a vicious taunt to the majority who live in complete destitution. There are clean strips of road where cheap laborers wash and sweep the sidewalks, pick up trash, and tend to bright flowers. But these small swatches of perfection are an illusion, short lived and extended only to the very wealthy and those visiting them.

My arrival to the post-op of the refurbished New Delhi Indira Gandhi Airport was quite a shock- greeted by an efficiency, order, and cleanliness unprecedented during my last trip to India in 2009. But just a stone's throw beyond, mothers and children with or without a man to protect them lay out their makeshift beds on the hard asphalt for some attempt at home for the night. Garbage is strewn everywhere. Tiny children, often barefoot, walk or crawl amongst broken glass and filth along the sidewalks as I wonder how they all look so exquisitely happy, and even so much healthier than their American counterparts.

Still, my whole body tenses up as I see the little ones walking unconsciously and unattended through the streets as mad drivers tear beyond at distances much too close for comfort. No one seems to care or take notice; no one jumps to guide them out of harm's way. There are three small children I take notice of walking in the road as we head out of Delhi, though the sidewalk is quite empty and cars and trucks are swerving and racing by unpredictably. They are holding hands, a boy and two girls, maybe all of 6 years old with their dark hair glistening, school clothes neatly pressed, bulky back packs clunking way too big against their small frames. We are in our taxi minivan about to zoom

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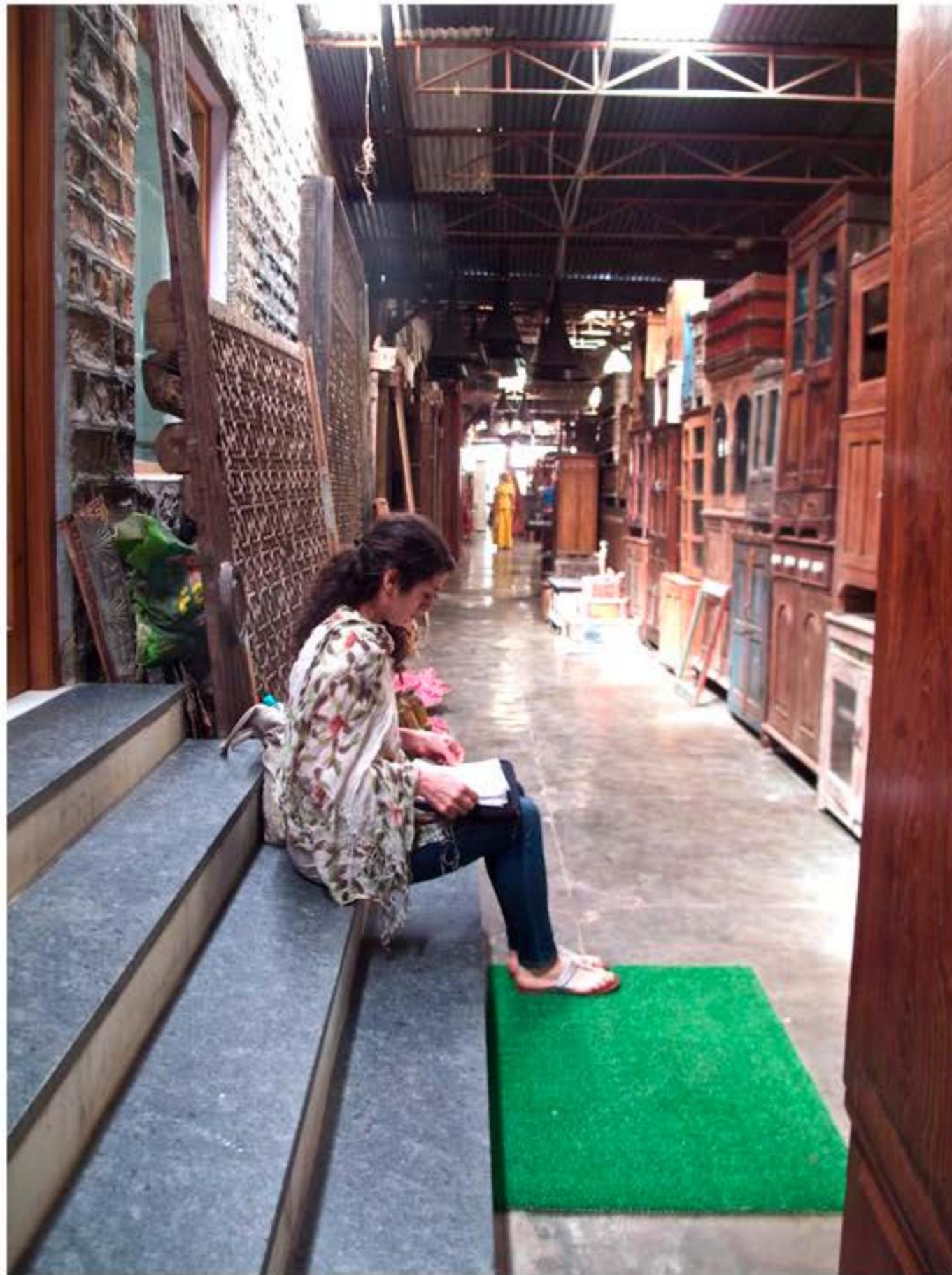
past them and my maternal instinct, as always, kicks in. I want to shout at them to step onto the sidewalk, "Don't you see the trucks! You are too little to be walking in the street like that, with the flow of traffic, with no shoulder to protect you—these madmen don't care!" But I say nothing behind my glass screen; there would simply be too much to yell about, and no one would care what the tourist lady was screaming in her English tongue anyhow. My traveling companion Ben snaps his shoulder and I wonder if it is the last photo that will be taken of them, strolling along without any supervision at all when they are obviously too little to know the dangers all around them. As we pass I can see they are chatting away and laughing uproariously, one cups her mouth, the boy throws his head back; they



couldn't care less about the cars that have nearly hit them or other vehicles as tires swerve in an effort of avoidance. There is a cow, uncountable cars, a few dogs, and now a large truck blasting down this narrow two-lane city street. I am watching out the back window, my heart in my throat as the truck honks insistently and the biggest girl casually leads them onto the sidewalk with a little skip just in time. And they keep on, their little heads bobbing and chatting away, no idea or care for what might have just occurred. And that's just how it is here, why I love it so. Reminders abound of our fragility, of death and LIFE, dark and light, woven together incessantly, informing each other. *How can one not be more grateful for all of it as a result?*

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Just at the city's edges, in the fields that outskirt Delhi, are uncountable peasants living a life that harks back to 5th Century simplicity. Thatched houses sit timelessly amongst verdant crops, goats and cows roaming about under lanky power lines, trucks thundering by spurting their dark exhales. I close my eyes and try to sleep, but can't.

We watch as camels pull carts along the highway, their drivers' heads and bodies wrapped in ageless white turbans. There is laundry hung out to dry on the fences along this major thoroughfare. Underwear, shirts, saris, pants, bright colors and light flapping in the exhaust and dirt being kicked up by passing vehicles. And there, right on the median that divides the highway itself "lungis"



(traditional male sarongs that are worn like loincloths) and more underwear sunning unabashedly for all to see. Not to mention that someone must risk their life to retrieve their bloomers.

Where we are driving now the garbage is getting impossibly worse. Over there, people are picking through trash; another guy is standing on a pile of it and washing himself like he is atop some gorgeous mountain! We're probably only an hour or so from Kumi and Anil's magical house, my Indian "parents" who "adopted" me during my last visit and with whom I make sure I stay at least a night or two during my visits here. Their house is an oasis, filled with herbs grown in pots, walls lined with uncountable books and art, and where open minded and challenging conversations flow deep into the night.

Though there are no fields anywhere in view, the sacred cows scrounge listlessly among plastic and tin scraps on sidewalks, in the middle of any road. The people in this area don't seem to be faring any better. These are villages though it looks like Beirut, visibly worn tarps and plastic sacks rummaged together to form walls and roofs. Garbage is piled within "courtyards" and literally up against their makeshift homes. It's impossible to make sense of.

Yet as tragic as it all is, there is something so sobering and simultaneously inspiring.

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How can one not return home and see their world differently? It's like paddles to the heart. Nothing can ever be the same again, and this second trip here just brings this notion further. As naive and simple as it sounds, I have always wanted to help make the world a better place. Whether home or abroad, I always struggle with the notion that simply selling and showcasing Fair Trade and eco-conscious products at Nectar is just not enough (no matter how much good the initiatives might actually be doing to create those products). Until Nectar begins its own non-profit initiative as well, giving a certain percentage of every single sale towards some cause we believe in, then we haven't arrived. Right now Nectar is built on the efforts of merely six women managing every aspect of this small but growing business—from in-store sales and marketing, to web maintenance, order processing, and shipping. We are doing all this with rather rudimentary systems and a meager budget, though fueled by passion, creativity and great belief in what we are co-creating. Being here in India makes me even more inspired to bring everything to the next level with my business so that we can make even more impactful positive change in the world. It is our human family that interests me, knowing no one culture's suffering is more important than another's, but my ties to this country make it the perfect place to begin.