



## HE PURSHES HIS MOUTH ANS SAYS «OM»

Saturday, January 20, 2018 – Guwahati (India) MG Road, Circuit House

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What will he tell his wife in the evening, I wonder as I visualise him hopping in his white tennis socks over a faded Persian rug after returning from work. In the background the TV is running. He rubs his nose with his thumb and forefinger and then opens two buttons of his crimson shirt that stretches taut over his paunch. «I met a foreigner today,» he might tell her. Or: «You know, these foreigners are really astonishing, not even once have they...» Or: «You know, my love, I did something good today.»

«I'm a police officer,» the man introduces himself, friendliness writ large on his face.

«Are you conducting an investigation?» I ask, feeling slightly amused. «No, I want to talk to you, follow me!»

Since the officer's commanding words offer no gap into which I can thrust my words of protest or refusal, I follow him, feeling puzzled. We walk across the street into a park that evidently belongs to the Court, pass by a golden statue of Mahatma Gandhi, and walk through a passage between two colonial buildings to the river.

I'm now sitting out on perhaps the most spectacular terrace in Guwahati. My gaze travels through the elegant railings to out beyond the mist-covered Brahmaputra, the island with the Umananda temple, and the islet Uravashi with the ruins of a lighthouse bequeathed by the British. The police officer has a green writing pad on his knees and is busily drawing a diagram of the universe, which he divides into positive and negative energies, visible and invisible, material and spiritual.



The diagram is part of a larger presentation, the core message of which is to demonstrate the superiority of Indian culture over Western culture. In his homeland the police officer sees a spiritual culture, in mine (America) a purely materialistic one. The Indian body is a diamond. «My body is a diamond!» he declares, stroking his chest. But the western body is cold and useless and therefore needs be artificially covered with diamonds: that's the philosophy of the West. In India, the focus is on biological nature, he explains, while in the West it is on technology. Alas, the artificial culture of the rich West today poses a threat to the natural culture of its destitute homeland; yet it is plants that produce oxygen, and not robots. NASA has recent-

ly discovered that there are sounds in the universe, while India has known this for thousands of years. I look at him questioningly. He purses his mouth and says «Om». Towards the end of the lecture he complains that a criminal spirit (he speaks of *mens rea*) has now been imposed on innocent India from outside. I ask him whom he has in mind. He looks at me with expectant eyes. «Well, the West, maybe,» I venture boldly, and he promptly digresses to talk about just how important it is for a policeman to read the truth in faces: «Body language, you understand!»

I understand – and then the lesson is over. Now I have to give him my name and phone number. He does not want to tell me his name; after all, he is a police officer. He also does not want me to take a picture of the diagram because I have everything in my head now. I am not allowed to make a portrait of him, either. However, as the gentleman wants a selfie with me, he cannot refuse to extend me the same courtesy. So we go into one of the offices and one of the servitors takes our photos with our smartphones with trembling hands after making a thousand salaams. In order not to be rude, I make myself look a little smaller. But knowing how bad a double-chin looks on me, I raise my head slightly. «I support biological culture,» the police officer repeats his key message to me – and then I am dismissed.

On the way to the gate I look at the photograph and find that I look hunched, crumpled, bemused and at the same time peculiarly arrogant – and that the blue waters of a pretty brook, portrayed in a poster behind me, are flowing directly into my ear. I do not know what the chief tells his wife in the evening. But this, in a nutshell, is my version of the story.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.