

## COSMOPOLIS

# Small places, new countries



KANISHK THAROOR

There are many things common between Indians and Puerto Ricans — a history of colonialism, reverence for idols, and a taste for *dhania patta*. In truth, they are worlds apart



**Island with a view**  
In Puerto Rico, joys are irresistible and constant. Seen here, a woman feeds corn to pigeons in the city of Old San Juan  
AP/RICARDO ARDUENGO

In August, I travelled to Puerto Rico, an equally beautiful and troubled island in the Caribbean. I had recently read Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, a memoir about her own Caribbean island of Antigua, in which she savages tourists. Her words reverberated still. "An ugly thing, that is what you are when you become a tourist, an ugly empty thing, a stupid thing." In her reckoning, a tourist is a kind of moral monster. Locals, she writes, resent the privileges of the tourist, "your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself."

If I'm honest, only a smidgen of guilt encroached upon the pleasures of Puerto Rico. I was there on honeymoon with my wife, a Puerto Rican born and raised in New York (which is home to so many Puerto Ricans that some consider it an outcropping of the island itself). Its joys were irresistible and constant: good rum, shimmering bioluminescent bays, 500-year-old cobbled streets, the long views of weather drifting west from the Lesser Antilles and dappling the sea.

A box-shaped island of just under four million people, Puerto Rico is an "unincorporated territory" of the United States. Its residents, while American citizens, have no meaningful representation in Washington. At the moment, the island teeters on the precipice of bankruptcy and financial ruin (it is often called "the Greece of the Caribbean"). The only industry of any remaining vitality is tourism.

When Kincaid wrote *A Small Place* in the late 1980s, she was imagining the mostly white Europeans and North Americans who came to sprawl upon the beaches of the Caribbean — "incredibly unattractive, fat, pastrylike-fleshed." Puerto Rico has no shortage of those now, but it is also full of Indian tourists. We ran into Indians everywhere: there in spandex

outfits renting mountain bikes, there spanking their naughty children on the street corners of Old San Juan, there amid the poetry shelves of a bookshop, there warily eyeing a plate of mashed plantains. Travel to Puerto Rico allows US-based NRIs the luxury of going somewhere without the rigmarole of applying for a visa. They come in droves and are a familiar sight for locals.

In Puerto Rican Spanish, all Indians are referred to as *hindús* or *indios de la India* ("Indians from India"). This avoids confusion with the normal use of the word *indios*, which is kept for the indigenous people of the Americas. The latter is a ghostly kind of Indian; the native Taíno inhabitants of the island were wiped out or absorbed into the colonial population centuries ago.

Is an Indian visiting the Caribbean a different sort of creature than a western visitor? Kincaid insists that western tourists travelled to Antigua in part to wallow in a sense of cultural superiority; history grants them the right to be tourists while making the natives objects of touristic regard, "backwards in that charming way."

Wishfully perhaps, I like to think that there is an easier understanding between Indians and the peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America. There are many things in common, from a history of European colonialism to the innate multiculturalism of our societies to a reverence for idols and a taste for *dhania patta*, garlic, and cumin. A few years ago, my mother, my brother, and I were accosted in the national museum in Mexico City by a janitor who claimed that he loved India for two reasons: the righteous idealism of the Non-Aligned Movement and the film *Sholay*. Gazing over

dusky San Juan this summer — its clutter of water towers, palm fronds, peeling rooftops, bright flowering trees — I felt I was looking out at Kolkata, my mother's city, in its own amber hour of cow dust.

But the experience of travel and tourism can have a sneaky way of reaffirming what we want to believe about ourselves. At best, we can try not to be "stupid" as Kincaid describes, to be attentive travellers, careful in our judgments, willing to observe. It would be foolish to interpret parallels as real bonds, to overstate the connections between India and Latin America. In truth, they remain worlds apart, exotic realms in the imagination of the other. There are no shared languages and few direct ties. If we are wired together at all, it is in large part through the west, a connection mediated by western cities, universities, sports, and media. After all, the only reason I met my wife in the first place was because we

both lived in New York.

Once when travelling in India, my wife was held briefly at an airport. The security officer puzzled at her American passport, Spanish name, and ambiguous appearance. "You look very Indian," the officer said. My wife explained that she was not Indian, but Puerto Rican. Unsurprisingly, the officer had never heard of Puerto Rico. "It's a small island near Cuba," my wife explained (she had found that of all the islands of the Caribbean, Indians most readily recognised Cuba). The officer nodded her head and considered the great flux of the wide world. "It must be one of those new countries," she said.

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**KANISHK THAROOR** is the author of *Swimmer Among the Stars: Stories*, a forthcoming collection of short fiction [@kanishktharoor](#)