

## SUMMERS IN INDIA WERE BRUTALLY HOT

By Joe McGowan

Summer of 1968 was an unusually hot one in India and it took a toll. Thousands of the poorest, living without air conditioning or even an electric fan, died of the heat.

Water wells and livestock ponds dried up. Crops withered and the United States rushed shipments of wheat and rice to help prevent mass starvation. An estimated 12 million tons of wheat left American ports.

Then an Indian professor announced a study he had done indicated there were five rats for every human in India—a total of about 2.5 billion rats!

I had the professor estimate how much grain those rats consumed and he came up with a total of 12 million tons a year, just what the United States was shipping to India!

My story caused an uproar in Washington and New Delhi. Congressmen wanted to halt shipments of “grain to feed rats”. The Indian government was very unhappy with my story, never denying it was true.

By May 1, the temperature across northern India, was running to 122 degrees. The pavement was so hot you could feel the heat through the soles of shoes.

I marveled at the poor who walked the streets barefoot.

Enterprising sidewalk vendors sold water. They would fill a clay pot with water and when a pedestrian needed a drink, they would take a ladle and pour a small amount

into the palm of the buyer, who paid a few paisa (fraction of a cent).

Upper class Indians had bamboo curtains hanging from the eaves of their homes. They hired young men to pour water over the curtains. Wind blowing through the wet bamboo resulted in a degree of cooling as from an evaporative cooler used in this country. One or two workers would stay on the roof. Colleagues would bring water in buckets, which would be hoisted by rope to the roof.

I kept a thick cloth at my desk and would use the cloth to shield my hand as I opened the car door or touched the steering wheel.

Often, I met my wife and son for lunch poolside at a hotel. The pool water was like a hot tub! The office car’s air conditioner couldn’t cope.

I especially admired the young American Peace Corps workers who lived in remote villages where there was no electricity. I met one young woman who told me her solution.

In her tiny hut she slept on a bed whose “mattress” consisted of woven ropes. She dipped her sheet in a pail of water, wrung it out, and pulled it over her. She would repeat this several times during the night. The evaporative process helped keep her cool!

As the summer wore on, Indians – and foreigners – kept a close watch on progress of the annual monsoon rains, which came up from the south. Newspapers reported daily that the monsoon had reached Hyderabad, or had reached Bombay and should reach New Delhi by Aug. 15 or so.

When the monsoon did arrive, it usually brought heavy rains and winds. The temperature dropped to the high 90s, but it was enough to bring relief.

The AP office was located in a building whose walls were of unfired brick and as a monsoon dumped great amounts of water, the moisture would slowly infiltrate the plaster walls and move upward. Bureau chiefs before me had made pencil marks showing how high the monsoon moisture had reached each year.

For the populace, the end of monsoon meant the arrival of fall, which was truly delightful in India. Plants came to life and some of the most beautiful roses I have ever seen flowered in the Indian capital. They helped one forget the dreadful summer months.

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