

CLEANING NEW DELHI FOR A U.N. MEETING

By Joe McGowan

New Delhi, like most Indian cities, is terribly overcrowded, with traffic congestion beyond belief, and with "sacred" cows strolling through dirty streets looking for something to eat.

During my three years in India reporting for The Associated Press, I actually saw emaciated cows find a piece of newspaper, chew and swallow it!

During the incredibly hot summer months, when temperatures soared to 122 degrees regularly, the stench in downtown areas was almost unbearable.

But, late in 1966, city and federal officials announced they were embarking on a major effort to clean up the Indian capital. The reason: early in 1967, a meeting of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) would be held in New Delhi. Dignitaries from around the world would attend.

One of the first announcements was that the government would build a rooftop, revolving restaurant atop the stately old Ashoka Hotel, a remnant from the days of British rule.

A few days later, Sudhir Dar, a wonderfully caustic and irreverent editorial cartoonist, had his traditional one panel cartoon on the front page of the Times of India.

It showed the Ashoka Hotel, a large revolving restaurant on top, and a huge pole from the center of the hotel to ground level. There, a peasant in a wrap-around dhoti and a whip in his hand, was prodding two oxen to pull the restaurant around in circles!

Eventually the conference was held, but the government never did get around to building the revolving restaurant.

However, for months when workmen went through the capital city, rounding up the hundreds of cows. They were herded miles out into the countryside so the UNCTAD delegates would not have to put up with them. Of course, no provision was made to feed the cows.

Other officials rounded up the many lepers and beggars who populated the streets of New Delhi, loaded them into pickup trucks and hauled them well into the countryside. Presumably they were able to beg for food in the rural villages.

Still other workmen went up and down every major thoroughfare in New Delhi whitewashing the trunks of every tree along the streets from the ground up about four feet.

Painting and cleaning also took place at Palam International Airport. This included capturing a substantial colony of monkeys who populated the airport terminal, often stealing purses or small bags from unsuspecting travelers.

Improvements were rushed at the city's large and relatively modern convention hall. One of the major

problems was getting the telephone people to install enough lines for the delegates and the world media who would be attending.

In New Delhi, there normally was a seven-year waiting list to get a telephone. Foreigners who moved to New Delhi looked for a rental apartment with a telephone, usually listed to someone who years ago had departed.

One day, one of my Indian reporters called to dictate a story about a dull speech by a Yugoslav diplomat. I interrupted him and said I had just heard

on national radio that the United States was protesting a Bulgarian speaker who denounced the U.S. over Vietnam. The conference was supposed to be non-political. My reporter said he intended to get around to it, but thought it insignificant!

The conference finally came and went, ending without any major accomplishments. New Delhi returned to normal. The cows and lepers returned and rain washed the white off the tree trunks.

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