**India under the Eiffel**

Abha Prakash

It was my second time in Paris and I had still not seen the Eiffel Tower. Taking the metro from Rueil-Malmaison after a change at Charles de Gaule station, I briskly walked four or five blocks to the famous destination. It was June -- tourists milled at street corners, the outdoor cafes were full, snatches of English and German flew around me. The warmth of the sun was exhilarating -- it was a perfect summer’s day. I was getting excited as I reached a large light-coloured building with a wide-open space bordered by stone steps.

On reaching the huge patio I had my first sight of the gigantic tower with its famously curved legs looming in the distance. I gasped in delight, quickened my pace but the tower was not getting any closer. After walking almost 400 meters on the bridge I finally reached the site and gazed up at the underside of the technological marvel. The mesh of carefully crafted metal stood solidly on the ground; its four legs planted wide apart. Despite its solidity, the tower seemed ready to transform into a walking metal giant or a monster rocket set to take off into the blue sky, sunlight glinting on its shiny surface.

People were already making a bee line for the queue forming at the ticket counter up ahead. Having been warned of the time-consuming journey up the tower, I decided to sit down in the park where several picnickers were scattered. A while later I got up to stroll under the structure again. The concrete walkway below was not exactly how I imagined it would be. The atmosphere was different from the Champs-Élysées , another popular Parisian landmark that I had visited the day before. Vendors ran behind you trying to sell miniature Eiffel Towers in all sizes. Children were insisting their parents buy them toy airplanes. There was hip hop blaring from a sound system. Some young boys danced in a circle of spectators.

When yet another salesman came by with some merchandise, I realized it would be nice to take a little memento for my parents in Delhi. I asked the price thinking I would need to speak in French but surprisingly the man replied in Hindi. I looked closely. The guy seemed to look like a Pakistani, but he could be from my own country. The price of five small key rings with little towers attached to each in bronze and brass was 2 euros. The big twelve-inch tower was 15 euros (approx. 1200 rupees) and the medium sized one was 7. I could not decide; something told me the man was trying to fool me. I did what I would do with roadside vendors in India. “Give me the big one for 7”. The man gaped. I thought this was it. He wouldn’t bother me again. To my surprise he brought his original price down to 10 all the while speaking to me in a mix of Urdu and Hindi, of how I should not be haggling at all here in France.

My attention got distracted at that moment by shrill whistles. In a sudden flurry of activity all the vendors dispelled in different directions with two police cyclists zipping after them. It didn’t take long to realize that the vendors were illegal, perhaps without work licenses of any sort. This would explain the vendor’s willingness to lower the rate.

Not having too much time on my hands I took a last look at the mammoth Eiffel, and turned to cross the narrow side roads to make my way back up the long bridge to the subway. Someone hurried close to me and extended the well-crafted 12 inch tower. It was my persistent and eager salesman. But he wasn’t in a mood to haggle. “Take the five key chains, madam, look how beautiful they are, will make nice gifts for your friends. Take the big tower, I’m selling you very cheap. Take for 12 euros. I have big family to feed, madam.” He thrust the unwrapped towers into my hand.

It was a fair bargain, I thought as I counted out the currency. But even better was the surprise of encountering a little bit of India under the Eiffel.

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