

Cheap Bananas



I point at a bunch of bananas. It's just six of them. The old man nods and puts the bunch into a plastic bag. Then he goes on to lift up another small bunch and tries to put them in the bag as well.

"No.", I say, wiggling my hand in disagreement.

He puts down the bunch, bobs his head and lifts the bag into the air for me to take.

"How much?", I ask.

"Fifty."

I know I would get this many bananas for twenty rupees back at my place. I smile at him knowingly.

"Twenty."

He bobs his head again, as if to say 'It was worth a try'. We have reached an agreement.

I give him fifty and wait for him to give me the change. He hands me a ten-rupee bill, then another, then it's his turn to wiggle his hand in front of my face. It means 'That's all you'll get'.

I am short ten rupees, but I shrug nonetheless, put the twenty rupees in my pocket, take my bananas and leave the push cart.

The very first and the very last thing I am thinking about when coming to another country, is the question of how I am perceived as somebody who wasn't born and raised here. It is the last thing, because I rarely find out a definite answer at the end of a stay, and because it is one of the most exciting things to ask people about! Usually these people can not - or would not - even tell me everything right from the beginning and many of them have to think a while before giving an answer; in fear of jeopardizing our relationship or in wonderment about their own uncertainty, I can't say.

There are a few potential answers that were given to me before I came to India, and even before I traveled abroad for the first time. Usually these answers would broach the issue of "critical whiteness". That's the idea that my light skin color and West-European appearance in general might trigger assumptions about my wealth and social status, and thus lead to a higher risk of being the victim of robbery, fraud or over-enthusiastic shopping assistants.

And fair enough, many, maybe most of the people that I ask about my appearance and the possible effects would tell me exactly the same thing at one point or another:

"Be careful, because, you know, (awkward pause) you're a foreigner and many might think you're an easy target."

And that's actually true. Because I didn't grow up in this country, I am - in a sense - like a newborn baby that knows little and less on how to behave, where to go and when to be careful. And if somebody wants to take advantage of that, he probably has a very high chance of succeeding.

But what I found out, is that "critical whiteness" and the negative effects of it are culture-specific. Everywhere where being white means being foreign you will be subject to certain disadvantages, but not in the same way. For instance, I am sure that there are countries in which people who look like me have to fear being victims of abduction or robbery at gunpoint. And, sure enough,

pickpocketing is a thing in India, but not to an extent where it would get dangerous for your own health. Here, I am much more worried about becoming a victim of fraud or being screwed over when buying fruits.

That being said, I think I should actually embrace being screwed over by merchants. This doesn't mean that I would simply give in to any price they suggest. It means that I know the usual value of the object and I am still willing to pay a little more, if the merchant in question tries to squeeze some extra bucks out of me. Because in the end I really am a privileged young white European who's of a fairly well-positioned family, and paying 10 cents more or less for a 2kg-bunch of bananas that's already just 50 cents will probably not affect my future in any way. It is my obligation as a lucky global citizen to know, but to care a tiny little less about the money I am spending in a poorer country.

It's late in the evening and I'm too tired to walk all the way back home.

"Rikshaw!" There's always one close by, and now is not an exception.

The driver looks at me enquiringly. I tell him my address and he slightly moves his head to point at the backseats. My sign to get in.

The rikshaw drives off, but after a few seconds I notice that the driver hasn't turned on the meter yet.

"Excuse me, could you please turn on the meter?"

"Five hundred", is the answer. His way of saying, that this is the price tag for my ride back home. In my head I calculate that a regular fare would only be around two to three hundred.

"No, turn on the meter, please!"

"Five hundred!" he insists. The rikshaw is getting faster.

"Alright, stop!!", I demand.

Finally he bobs his head, shortly turns back to me grinning, and turns on the meter.

We arrive. The meter shows 280 rupees worth of driving. I dispose of checking my mobile app that would have told me, whether this is correct or the meter is rigged. The price sounds fair.

I give him three hundred. He counts the money.

"No, no! Five hundred!" He turns towards me, an indignant look on his face.

I laugh. It's a cold laugh though. I am not in the mood for any more games.

"I payed you according to the meter." I point at it. "No, no! No meter!" He turns around the small 'For Hire' sign and the meter resets.

The price vanishes. I am getting out of the rikshaw.

"I will not pay you any more." I doubt that he can understand me.

"Five hundred!" he demands one more time as I make my way to the gates of my building complex. I have left him with a more than generous tip by not asking for the change, but I still have to force myself not to look back and see if he would come after me. I relax only after crossing the gates and looking into the familiar faces of our guardsmen.

The metaphor with acting like a newborn in a foreign country doesn't quite add up. Firstly, there are some general rules of conduct that would probably work almost anywhere in the world, and they are fairly easy to figure out. Secondly, being a more or less experienced human I can take a little bit of wisdom into any foreign setting, and the more of those I encounter, the higher my chance to succeed in the ones to come. It's a look on somebody's face, the taste of the atmosphere, a feeling in the gut, that attracts you to certain situations and leads you to turn around and walk away in others.

Finally and funnily enough, it is my opinion that local people are always the most careful actors in their own environment. They tell the most horrifying stories about what might happen to me, give me ton's of advice on what to do and what not and are more suspicious than I, as a forced-to-be-open-minded traveler, could ever be. To know this gives me the biggest feeling of security possible in an environment like this and I smile at everyone who is aghast at the stupidly high price I just paid for my bananas.