

Pat's Return Trip to India 2018

Monday 8 January

Auckland airport check-in

Was asked for my Indian e-visa documentation before they would let me on the plane...

Auckland to Singapore

12-hour, wait so used the Transit lounge in the airport, highly recommended.

Singapore departure lounge

“Would Mrs Patricia Booth make herself known to the counter.” They wanted to check my Indian e-visa documentation before they would let me on the plane...

Then to Kolkata arriving at 9pm local time

I was the last out of the immigration area, where my e-visa seemed to be scrutinised as though it might be a fake...please, it's not. My suitcase was the last lonely one waiting to be picked up from the carousel. Was this an omen for the trip? No, a young man with a big notice saying “Mrs Patricia Booth” was still waiting for me to drive me to my hotel: my travel agent's plans were in place.



Pipal Tree Hotel – Kolkata. <http://www.pipaltreehotel.com/>

Overnight at Pipal Tree Hotel 15 minutes from airport. Pleasant, smallish, good multi-ethnic breakfast. Recommended.

As I ate my breakfast and gazed out the window at a supposedly four-lane highway with a median barrier, I saw a man cycling on his rickshaw talking on his iPhone. (I really must learn to use one...)

Tuesday 9 January

Kolkata to Agartala

I just about burst into tears when I saw the name on the terminus building. The last time I flew into Agartala was after I had sat my School Cert exams in November 1959!



Agartala Airport.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agartala_Airport,_Agartala,_Tripura.JPG

Airport security in the three Indian airports I travelled through was very tight: even though my small shoulder bag had been put through the x-ray machine on leaving Agartala it did not have an Agartala airport security stamped label, so I had to go back past hundreds of travellers to put it through again and get the required stamp – and be the last passenger on the plane.

Delsie Guy was there to meet me, and the Tripura Baptist Christian Union (TBCU) driver Mohansingh Molsom, a delightfully outgoing

man who spoke good English, and with whom I subsequently had many chats. Delsie is a retired NZ missionary who visits from Auckland every northern winter to see how the sponsored children in the school hostels are doing.

Mohansingh avoided the centre of town. I had been looking forward to seeing the Palace again, but it was not to be. The airport is on the other side of town from Arundhutinagar, now known as AD Nagar, where the 25-acre compound is which my dad purchased way back in 1939 on behalf of the NZ Baptist Missionary Society. The “town” is now the second largest city in North-East India (after Guwahati in Assam), population probably 500,000, and was one enormous traffic jam. One of my ideas for the visit had been to go to town, in particular to the Bata shoe shop where my mother always took me during the winter school holidays for the next pair of uniform shoes. I decided it would not be worth the hassle. The road from the airport was lined with election flags: the red hammer and sickle for the Communist Party which had been in power for the last twenty years, and the orange, green and white for the BJP party which subsequently won.

When I lived there in the 1950s, AD Nagar was separated from the town by a couple of kilometres of rural road. Now every inch is covered with the classic small buildings of urban India. I did venture out of the compound one evening to buy choories (bangles) for my two granddaughters and was able to buy them about 50 metres from the compound gate.

Even before we got to the compound gates I saw yellow buses labelled St Paul’s School...



Author photo



The Kiwi House on the Tripura Baptist Christian Union site. *Author Photo*

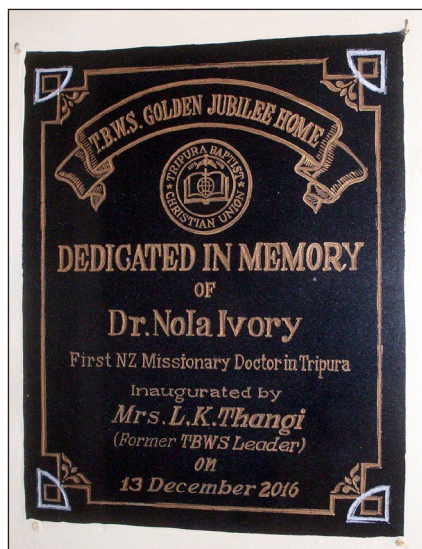
After lunch Delsie took me for a walk to see how the preparations were going for the St Paul's School 75th Jubilee. My Dad was the first Principal, and he and my mother looked after the first fourteen students (twelve boys and two girls) who had been handpicked to come in from the villages where there was very little formal schooling available. The 1943 school went up to class 6, with instruction in Bengali, as there are many tribal languages in Tripura. 75 years later there are nearly 3,500 students, including 250 in boarding (still coming in from the villages), studying from Kindergarten to Year 12, and instruction is in English.

The school buildings are now the major users of the compound's 25 acres: multi-storey classroom blocks, a huge hall, not finished in time for the Jubilee, but it didn't matter as it was the winter dry season, and a huge marquee or pandal was big enough for 5000 plastic chairs. A new covered quadrangle was big enough for hundreds to be fed at a time. It will be very useful during the monsoons for outdoor activities.

I stayed with Delsie in the Kiwi house, built in 1997 and financed by Wellington Central



Bed with mosquito nets. *Author photo*



Plaque in memory of Dr Nola Ivory.
Author photo.

Baptist Church. It is available for 'out of state' visitors. The mosquitoes were numerous: I slept under a mosquito net, the sort which hangs from four posters, and which was exactly the same style as in the 1950s. Konica, a St Paul's primary school graduate who has worked as the Kiwi House housekeeper ever since the house opened, looked after us well.

Another special visit on the compound was to the Dr Nola Ivory Guesthouse, opened in December 2016. Dr Ivory, or Auntie Nola to me, was the much-loved mission doctor during the 1940s and 50s. The Tripura Baptist Women's

Society had identified a need for accommodation for families coming from the villages to accompany their sick family member needing medical attention. The ground floor of the guesthouse is completed with seven bedrooms which can each take two or three beds, plus bathroom and kitchen facilities. The rooms have been named thus: Deborah, Esther, Hannah, Jochebed (I had to look her up: she was the mother of Moses), Miriam, Ruth, and Sarah. After a while it dawned on me that these were all Old Testament heroines. When the next floor is completed, the plan is for the rooms to be named with New Testament heroines!



Pat & Konica. *Author photo*



St Paul's School.

(By Bidyut I 2345 - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25705523>)

Thursday 11 and Friday 12 January 75th Jubilee celebrations

The occasion started with the Indian National Anthem. To my astonishment and delight I was able to remember most of it and sing along.

Apart from many speeches, it was rather like a kapahaka festival: various tribal dances and singing, from the Kindergarten classes to the senior Class / Year 12, and continuous food available. I have to confess that of all the thousands of folk fed, I had to ask if someone could find me some



Dancers perform at 75th celebrations. Author Photo

cutlery. I knew I was totally out of practice to be able to eat curry and rice in public politely and competently with my fingers.

The Jubilee was opened by the Governor of Tripura (this is an appointment made by the Prime Minister in Delhi). He was very complimentary and respectful of what the school was doing. He said that, even though he was not a Christian, he had attended a Christian school and had learned to respect the teachings. In the context of anxiety amongst the Christian community throughout India about the rise of the BJP political party which is openly pro-Hindu, I decided to interpret the Governor's comments as generous and hopeful for the future of St Paul's.

Note: The BJP party won the State elections, announced on 3 March.

I was asked to speak – ‘reflect’ – on the second day to an audience of 5000! Delsie and I were the only white faces, so I got a good response when I said a few words in Bengali. I also talked about having attended the school in the Kindergarten, where I learnt my Bengali alphabet before my English ABC, and about how there was still a lot of jungle on the mission compound in the 1950s.

Note: There is now accommodation for 93 households to live on the compound.

I described how at that time, the playground between the original bamboo school building (now long gone) and our house had a bit of a slope on it, so sport had to be played on a not-level field. I said I thought my father got the boys working quite hard to finally level the area. When I came home from Darjeeling for the winter months, I was allowed to play badminton with the High School boys...

I noted that the school motto is now in English: “Be an example in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity” (from Paul's first letter to Timothy 4:12).

I said that in 1943 it was in Bengali, and my father recorded it in the centenary history of the NZBMS “Towards the sunrise” page 176: “This alliterates beautifully in Bengali, i.e. “Shastra, Sheeka, Shaste, Shebai, Shidho Ho.”

I ended with “...the blessing which my church minister always says: Remember you are surrounded by the love of God every moment of every day.”

Another special guest at the Jubilee was Lalbulliana Rokhum, now 82 years old. He was present to be honoured as the first Indian Principal of the school (1965-1978). He was one of my Dad's proteges, and had been mentored through primary, secondary and tertiary education by both my parents. In fact, Lalbul regarded me as his little sister. We were able to have some good catch-up conversations through the days.



Pat with Lalbulliana Rokhum, first Indian principal of St Paul's School. *Author Photo*

Saturday 13 January

I had the chance to travel 200k north-east to Jampui in the hills with Rev CK Debbarma, General Secretary of the TBCU, to the centenary celebrations of “the coming of the gospel to Tripura.” This was not an initiative of the NZ Baptists in 1918, but of Welsh Presbyterian missionaries, I believe.

The journey by car took the best part of 7 hours, including a couple of stops for morning tea (made with mainly boiled milk and sugar) and lunch (the curry of the day: too spicy for me, but I enjoyed the dahl). Most of the trip was on a road as windy as the Rimutaka Hill Road, only it went on for 160 of the 200 km, and was very potholed.

Because it was the winter season, the paddy fields were being used for growing vegetables: mainly cauliflower, but there was a wide variety

of other produce available in the wayside stalls. I saw a small elephant tethered at the side of the road, and a number of tethered pigs. Many untethered goats and their beautiful babies wandered fearlessly across the road, and got out of the way of the traffic at their own pace.

We got there at about 2pm, to a flat area in the hills where there was another pandal, (marquee) this time for merely 1000. Within half an hour, I was approached by two old ladies who had known my mother. They each enveloped me and wouldn't let me go for a long time. It was very moving. One was Lalkhaw Thangi, widow of Rev. Nehliana, one of my Dad's colleagues, and the other Mrs Mawii Sailo, wife of Ngur Zuala Sailo, who was on St Paul's staff when Franklyn Gaze was Principal in the early 1960s.

Again, I was asked to speak, but this time with an interpreter (the language was Mizo: Mizoram is a state between Tripura and Myanmar). Although I have done a lot of public speaking, I have never had the experience of being translated. However, I knew from watching my Dad preaching out in the villages of the importance of speaking in short phrases so that the translator could keep up.



Jampui <http://tripuratourism.gov.in/node/55>

Before I spoke, there had been a number of musical presentations, mainly choral. The Lushai people are renowned for their singing, and this occasion was stunning. So I remarked on how heart-warming it had been to meet folk who knew my parents, especially my mother, and said how she would have loved hearing the music on this occasion. I said: “Music needs no translation – but (turning to the translator) you will have to translate that.” No one laughed, and I thought: “Well, that didn’t work,” but then he translated it – and they laughed!

I concluded by saying that my parents had always taught me that we need to show the fruits of the Spirit, so quoted one of my mother’s favourite texts (from Micah ch 6:8):

“What does the Lord require of thee? To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.”

Or in a newer translation:

“What God requires of us is to do what is right, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.”

On reflection, I decided that the experience of being translated was rather like antiphonal singing: there was quite a rhythm about it. An unexpected enjoyable experience.

Sunday 14 January

The next morning we travelled the 200 km back to Agartala. On the way, we stopped for lunch at Chailengta at the home of Rev CK’s parents-in-law who live surrounded by their wider family. It is always such a privilege to be invited into a private home, and this was no exception. After talking about things Tripura, I discovered that one of the younger sons was interested in Geography and things environmental, so I found myself giving a talk on the effects of the Kaikoura earthquake...

Monday 15 January

7.30am and time to leave for the airport. In one way, it was hard, and tears were shed, but only because I think they were tears of gratitude for my family legacy. Delsie and Lalbul accompanied me to the airport, where I set my face towards the next memory trip:

Darjeeling

I flew from Agartala to Kolkata, then to Bagdogra airport, at the foot of the hill up to Darjeeling. Bagdogra is also a military airport, one of those closest to the border with China. The runway was lined with about 10 fighter jets wingtip to wingtip: rather unsettling.

Again, my personal driver was waiting for me to drive the 80km up to Darjeeling, 7000 feet above sea level.

The drive up from Bagdogra was on the Pankhabari road. It seemed unfamiliar, and I couldn't see the toy railway track which my memory told me should be running alongside the road. I finally discovered from my driver (who spoke quite good English) that the Pankhabari Road does not join up with the railway until half way up the hill at Kurseong. It was the original road built in the mid-nineteenth century, and was far too steep, so was superseded by the Hill Cart road, which was the road I was familiar with.



The steep road and railway line up to Darjeeling.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Toy_train_of_darjeeling.JPG

Five days later, on the way down, I suggested we drive via the Hill Cart Road, which was much more of a memory lane. We stayed with the railway line all the way. Apparently it is maybe 10 km longer, and more prone to landslides, so the original road was upgraded maybe 15 years ago.

So to the next hopeful adventure, visiting Mount Hermon School, my alma mater from 1950 to 1960. I knew the school had been closed since June 2017 because of the so-called Gurkha uprising. For many years, there has been a movement by the Gurkhas (who are ethnically Nepalese) in the Darjeeling District to have their own state (or at least some autonomy from the West Bengal government). This erupted into outright armed rebellion for 104 days in June / July / August 2017 and resulted in all the Darjeeling boarding schools having to close down, so I wondered if MHS would be open.



Mt Hermon School.

<http://tourismdarjeeling.com/mount-hermon-school-darjeeling/>

Perhaps the most unexpected connection I made in Darjeeling was that the proprietor of the little hotel I was booked into (by a Wellington-based Indian travel agent) was a Mr Justin whose brother-in-law turned out to be Mr Surendra Kumar Rongong, ex Vice-Principal at MHS in 2008/2009! His wife, Mrs Saroz Rongong had been in charge of the infants' section. I met them both briefly, and Mrs Rongong kindly facilitated my visit to MHS. I think Mr Rongong said he was the nephew of the Mr Rongong who married Joy Stewart, sister of David Stewart who was the MHS Principal for half of my time there (1956-60).

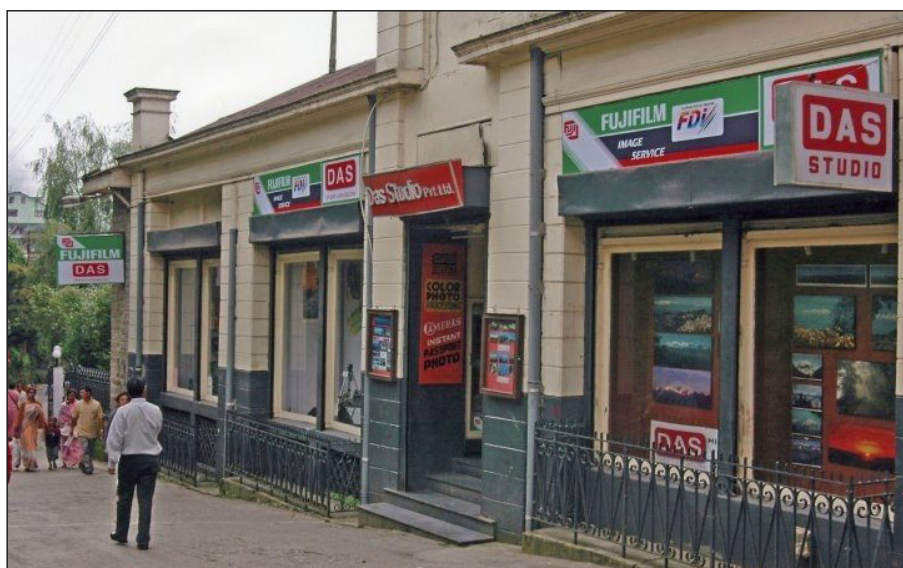
I was able to visit the school briefly. I met Rev K Sardar, the current Administrator, who was hopeful that the school would be re-opening in February. He kindly arranged for one of the office staff (Pemba Tamang) to show me around the main building which was undergoing an upgrade of the electrical system (so the power was off, but I could see well enough!).

I was particularly interested to visit the site of “Aotearoa” the cottage way below what we used to call the Log Cabin. This cottage was used by the New Zealand Baptist missionaries when they were on holiday. Mr Tamang and I were able to wander down some very narrow tracks to the site, but the cottage had been demolished, which did not surprise me: it was built in the 1930s.

However, cottages with the evocative names of Swans Nest, Homely House, Victoria House and Sunflower were still there. Australian, American and British missionary families had stayed in them during my childhood.

On the road to the school (North Point) there were still signs of the fighting which had occurred in the summer of 2017: burnt out vehicles on the side of the road.

For old times’ sake I visited Keventer’s (surely one of the first milk bars in the world in the 1950s), Glenary’s, a posh restaurant in the 1950s where



DAS Studio, Darjeeling.

<https://www.justdial.com/Darjeeling/Das-Studio-Judge-Bazar/>

my mother used to take us to afternoon tea (cakes and sandwiches on a three-tier stand), Das Studio who had kindly given me permission to use their photo of the Himalayas on the front cover of my autobiography “Pat’s India,” and the Oxford Book Shop on Chowrasta, where I used to spend most of my pocket money on books for girls. I travelled on the toy train to Ghum and back, and also enjoyed the relatively new zoo on Birch Hill – in my time the zoo was in the Botanical Gardens. There were clouded leopards and snow leopards, black panther, Royal Bengal tigers, Himalayan wolf and Himalayan red pandas.

Even though I was there in the middle of winter (2 degrees Celsius one morning!), the town was very busy and crowded (it was the Saraswati Puja time) so it seems that the tourist industry has recovered somewhat.

I was able to get into the St Andrew’s Anglican Church, built in 1843, on the Chowrasta, where we sometimes used to go from school for Evensong. There were many memorial plaques around the walls, mainly for soldiers and tea planters, but including one to pioneer German Baptist missionaries Rev Andrew (Johann Andree) and Sophie Wernicke and their daughter Mary Cowley who was born in Darjeeling in 1844 (one hundred years before I was born). Their memorial stated:

“They trod untrodden paths in years long past,
Of danger, war and hardship stood the test;
They strove, achieved and died, and at the last
Found with the God they served and worshipped, Rest.”

It resonated rather...

The snows were out every day of my five-day visit and I renewed my love for them. They seemed more ethereal even though the sky was blue: one of the locals brought me down to earth by saying there was much more pollution now...

Saturday 20 January

Kolkata

I had not expected the two days in Kolkata to be so astounding. I was staying with NZ Baptists including Helen M, the daughter of Dr Lawrence Sanson, who developed the hospital on the Agartala compound from the mid-fifties to 1973. Helen's childhood was like mine: born in Tripura, grew up on the compound, went to Mount Hermon School. She still speaks Bengali well, and is comfortable walking round the Kolkata streets.

Helen and husband John live alongside a number of others, including Helen's sister Annie and her husband Kerry, in the largest red-light district of Kolkata: Sonagachi, where 10,000 women ply their street trade (they call it 'standing in line') in an area of one square kilometre. There is a huge trade in sex trafficking, from Nepal and Bangladesh, as well as the districts around Kolkata.

These folk are involved in running "Freeset: in business for freedom." The project is focussed on offering an alternative to work in the sex trade, so there are now two factories in Sonagachi and another out of urban Kolkata, employing 300 women working on Fair Trade principles filling international orders for T-shirts and bags and other textile goods. A further 700 women are on a waiting list wanting work, so another factory is planned.

Helen took me to visit both factories. Each is about four stories high built around a central courtyard which gives ventilation to the various workrooms. There is a crèche on-site and health insurance is part of the 'salary package'. A social work and counselling service is being developed: a western concept, so they are aware it needs to be tailored to local cultural mores. When I heard it was called Tamar, I was very moved. Many years ago I was involved with a feminist group who lead a service on the story in the Hebrew Bible of King David's daughter Tamar, who was raped by her brother (II Samuel 13:1-22. See also "Texts of Terror" by Phyllis Trible.)

Monday 22 January

My last day in India

In the morning, Helen suggested we go for a walk to the Hooghly river along which Kolkata became the commercial hub of British Bengal three hundred years earlier. To get there she hailed a pedicab. It already had one passenger, but in Kolkata, if there's room for more, you just hop on. That took us a certain way, but then we had to find the correct alleyway. When our fellow passenger discovered we wanted to find the river, he got out and escorted us there! We actually found ourselves at Nimtala, which is Rabindranath Tagore's burning ghat, a beautiful quite small marble park where you look over the fence onto the river. Tagore is a famous Bengali writer, the first non-European to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913, who died in 1941, and was cremated on this spot. Tagore wrote both the Indian and the Bangladesh National Anthems.

As we looked onto the river, we became aware of a group carrying a body swaddled onto a stretcher down into the river so that the body could be sprinkled with water which would earlier in its journey have been part of the sacred Ganges River. They then carried it up and along the bank to the municipal crematorium where four tall chimneys were smoking well.



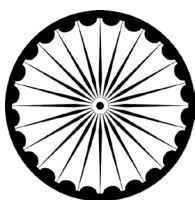
Hooghly River, Kolkata. <http://indiauntravelled.blogspot.co.nz/2013/10/calcutta.html>

We then retraced our steps and found a chaa dokhan, a tea shop which had been recommended to Helen by one of the other missionaries. It was about three metres square, on the corner of a very busy intersection. Two sides were open to the intersection, which in the dry winter season meant the shop got the full blast of the road dust, but had a very good view of the comings and goings, including a young woman riding a motorbike with a five-year-old on the back, hanging onto her, and a toddler in front between the driver and the handlebars...

The tea was made in our presence on a small charcoal fire with water, milk, tea leaves and freshly shredded ginger boiled up, then strained through a piece of cloth which had already been used for a previous batch. The result was poured into a small clay bowl, one of many in an uncovered pile, and was delicious. When we had finished, we tossed the bowl into a bucket and continued on our way.

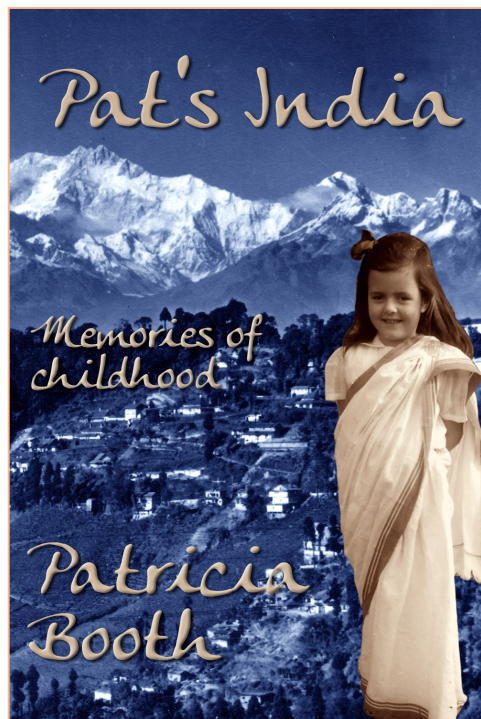
When it was time for me to leave for the airport (about 5.30pm), Helen and John escorted me down to the main road and Helen hailed a random taxi, negotiated the price for me before I got in, and we said farewell. I soon discovered that the car was very old as it stalled every time he stopped, and the streets were very busy: it was Saraswati Puja time, nearly as big as Divali.

I realised that all he knew about me was that he had picked me up from the biggest red-light district in Kolkata, and was taking me to the airport. For the first time on the trip I began to feel a leetle bit anxious. How was he to know that I wasn't carrying a lot of ill-gotten gains, and might be worth disappearing? What little faith. All was well. He finally got onto the blue-and-white-marked motorway to the airport, and I arrived in very good time.



Pat's India

Memories Of Childhood



How do we each define our own intimate culture? How do we know where we belong?

Daughter of New Zealand Baptist missionaries, Patricia Booth was born in north-east India during World War Two, and attended school in Darjeeling until she was 16 years old. In recording her childhood memories, she has pondered on the various cultural influences she experienced.

How have they shaped her understanding of who she is and where she belongs as she enters old age?

“...Pat’s childhood experience is more multilayered, multicultural and multi-everything than I had imagined. Her very textured experience was influenced by more factors than I could realise as a child. India is as different from New Zealand as you can get, and swinging between the two countries is a complicated manoeuvre.

That makes this book a fascinating and valuable addition to your bookshelf...” *Rev Dr Susan Jones, from the Foreword*

Available from the publisher:
Philip Garside Publishing Ltd in

Print: <https://philipgarsidebooks.com/products/pat-s-india-print>
and

eBook formats:

<https://philipgarsidebooks.com/products/pat-s-india-ebooks>